

Daily Union Article
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Title: Tackling Food Waste

The food waste in the United States is embarrassingly out of control. In fact, food waste is estimated at between 30-40% of the total food supply produced in America. According to statistics provided by Feeding America, an organization whose mission is to feed America's hungry through a nationwide network of member food banks and engage our country in the fight to end hunger, \$218 billion worth of food is thrown away in America every year. By weight, this breaks down into food wasted in the following areas:

- 52 billion pounds* of food waste is created by food manufacturers, grocery stores and restaurants. This food waste ends up in our country's landfills.
- 20 billion pounds* of fruits and vegetables are discarded on farms or left in fields to be plowed under.
- 72 billion pounds* of edible and safe food – from every point in the food production cycle – also ends up in landfills and incinerators each year.
* *Consumer food waste data not included in these statistics.*
- 43% of our total food waste and loss occurs in our American homes. This equates to approximately \$144 billion in food waste and lost by this area, alone.

The United States leads ALL countries around the world in the amount of food waste and loss it generates. While one in eight Americans are food insecure, roughly 400 pounds of food is wasted annually by each individual in the United States. The U.S. Department of Agriculture defines food insecurity (see inset) as a lack of consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy life.

Inset Although hunger and food insecurity are closely linked, they have their own distinct defining characteristics. "Hunger refers to a personal, physical sensation of discomfort, while food insecurity refers to a lack of available financial resources for food at the level of the household" *Source: Hunger and Health: Feeding America.org: Understanding Food Insecurity*

ReFED: Rethink Food Waste through Economics and Data is a nonprofit organization. Created to network people, businesses, and the agriculture industry from all facets of food production, they strive to tackle the U.S. goal of reducing our food waste and loss by 50% before the year 2030 ends. They have developed a data-driven plan that can guide our food system stakeholders toward making a significant impact toward meeting the goal. In their academic research report *Roadmap to Reduce U.S. Food Waste*, the nonprofit offers a realistic path to cut the food waste back.

The roadmap offers specific interventions that can help cut food waste by 20% immediately, while offering next steps needed for reaching the 2030 goal. In this report, the organization also points out the two most cost-effective solutions:

- 1) Consumer Education Campaigns
- 2) Standardized Date Labeling

These approaches are relatively inexpensive to develop and implement. An additional benefit of these two immediate solutions is that these practices can help reduce the food costs for consumers. It equips consumers with the knowledge and tools they need to make better food purchasing decisions.

Homes can make the most significant and fastest impact on decreasing the amount of food waste in America. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has three areas households can focus on for reducing wasted food in our homes: Planning, Prepping, and Storing.

Planning

The planning begins with identifying what meals you have in mind for your family each week. From that, make a shopping list.

If you know what you will be preparing, then your grocery list becomes better defined and you will be less likely to make impulse purchases of items that could spoil before you use them. By keeping a running list of your “go to” menu ingredients, you can easily shop for and prepare meals that your family enjoys.

Consider how many times you plan to have a particular dish. Purchase what you need with that number in mind. For example, if you plan to have chef salad for two meals, purchase only enough salad ingredients for those two meals.

Take inventory of your refrigerator, freezer, cupboards, and pantry before you leave for the store. This will help you avoid buying food you already have.

Prepping

Once you have made your purchases at the store, prepare your perishable foods as soon after they are purchased as possible. This will save you time, energy, and money later in the week. Some of the fresh produce can be washed, dried, and prepared according to how they will be used in a main course or will provide an easy healthy snack for those on the run.

Use your freezer and make sure there is a date on the container or freezer bag before you put it away. Foods such as bread, sliced fruit or meat can be frozen for future use. For perishable items, prepare and cook them in advance, then freeze them for use throughout the month.

On those cooler summer mornings, which are few and far between, cook up some ground beef to make taco meat or cook up chicken breasts to freeze for later.

Storing

Use a storage chart to help you know how long food can retain its quality in the refrigerator or freezer. If you have an abundance of produce, take a class on how to preserve food with freezing, canning, or preserving. This is an especially helpful skill to have during garden season.

Berries will not hold their freshness too long after being washed so it is best to wait until you want to eat them to prevent mold growth.

Label your repackaged and leftover foods. By knowing the date you prepared the food, you will be able to determine how long it has been in the refrigerator or freezer.

All of us can make a sincere effort in reducing the food waste and loss statistics that the U.S. undeniably owns. It simply takes a bit more planning and a conscientious effort from each of us. For more information about food storage and meal planning, contact me at the Geary County K-State Research and Extension office at 785-238-4161. Until next time, keep living resourcefully!