

Food Is Too Important to Waste

Frank Yiannas, Wal-Mart Stores, Inc.

January 27, 2016

Imagine going into a grocery store, purchasing three bags full of food, and discarding one of the bags you just purchased in the nearest garbage can as you leave the store. Does that sound ridiculous? Of course it does. But, in essence, that's what happens every day around the world.

Every year, one-third of all food produced globally goes to waste. That's 1.3 billion tons of food, which is enough food to cover all of the land mass from Minnesota to Panama. This waste affects our planet, communities, people, and wallets.

Although food waste can occur along the entire farm-to-fork continuum, the point of greatest loss varies by region of the world. For example, in countries with more-developed economies, a larger proportion of food is wasted closer to the fork end of the continuum (in restaurants, institutional settings, and the home). In contrast, in developing countries, which lack infrastructure and market access, a larger share of food waste occurs on the farm, during storage, and during transportation.

In total, the amount of food waste that occurs at the retail level is smaller when compared to other points where food waste can occur in the farm-to-fork continuum (Buzby et al., 2014). Nevertheless, at Walmart, we believe retailers have a very important responsibility to be part of the food waste solution. We also believe retailers are uniquely positioned to influence change both upstream in the supply chain and downstream in customers' homes.

Accordingly, let me share just a few examples of what we're doing at Walmart to

help minimize food waste and describe the role retailers can play to be part of the solution.

Efficient Food Distribution Systems

As industry leaders in logistics and transportation, we facilitate the creation of highly efficient food distribution systems that allow us to shorten the amount of time perishable foods spend in distribution channels. Each day removed from the transport of food is a day of shelf life we give back to the customer, which in turn reduces waste in the home.

Stringent Food Safety Requirements

Although often not included in the food waste conversation, improved food safety results in reduced food waste. In 2008, Walmart became the first U.S. retailer to require food suppliers to be certified to one of the internationally recognized Global Food Safety Initiative standards (Crandall et al., 2012). This requirement improved food safety and reduced the total number of food recalls and withdrawals by our suppliers across the industry by at least 34 percent. Thought of a little differently, Walmart's improved food safety requirement not only protected customers but also reduced the amount of non-saleable food jars and boxes from being sent to landfills by hundreds of thousands, if not millions.



Commitment to Zero Waste

At Walmart, we're also reducing food waste through food donations, organic recycling, and markdown programs (discounting the sale of foods nearing their use-by dates). In 2013, for example, Walmart donated 571 million pounds of food—the equivalent of 369 million meals—to local food banks such as Feeding America. That's a lot of good food being eaten—not wasted.

Date Labeling Uniformity

Research shows that the multitude of date labels (use by, sell by, expires on, and so forth) that appear on foods today are a source of confusion for many consumers (Leib et al., 2013). In fact, it's been estimated that 21 percent of food waste that occurs in the home is due to this issue—confusion over date labels (WRAP, 2011). In 2014, to draw greater attention to this issue, Walmart helped commission a peer-reviewed white paper on this topic, under the auspices of the Institute of Food Technology (Newsome et al., 2014). The paper included several calls to action, with one being the adoption of uniform date labels that we've already acted on. In 2015, Walmart asked all of its private brand suppliers to adopt a standardized date label, "best if used by," for any food they make for us that does not require date labels for safety reasons. Furthermore, we are currently piloting new technologies, such as indicator labels that change color over time to specify freshness—a method far more accurate for portraying optimal quality than date stamping.

Consumer Education

Finally, we're engaging in consumer education activities to share tips with our customers that they can use at home to minimize food waste. For example, one can view a video ([Food Is Too Important to](#)

[Waste](#)) we recently ran on our check-out TV system in our stores. It's estimated that we reached more than 10 million viewer impressions in just a few short weeks with steps that consumers can take at home to reduce food waste.

In closing, remember that food is too important to waste. Reducing food waste is a shared responsibility.

Together, we can make a difference, reduce food waste, and save people money so they can live better.

Frank Yiannas is vice president of food safety and health for Wal-Mart Stores, Inc. He is a past president of the International Association for Food Protection, past vice chair of the Global Food Safety Initiative, and an adjunct professor in the Michigan State University Master in Food Safety Program.

References

- Buzby, J. C., H. F. Wells, and J. Hyman. 2014. *The estimated amount, value, and calories of postharvest food losses at the retail and consumer levels in the United States*. Economic Information Bulletin 121. Washington, DC: Economic Research Service, US Department of Agriculture.
- Crandall, P., E. J. Van Loo, C. A. O'Bryan, A. Mauromoustakos, F. Yiannas, N. Dyenson, and I. Berdnik. 2012. Companies' opinions and acceptance of global food safety initiative benchmarks after implementation. *Journal of Food* 75(9):1660–1672.
- Leib, E. B., D. Gunders, J. Ferro, A. Nielsen, G. Nosek, and J. Qu. 2013. *The dating game: How confusing food date labels lead to food waste in America*. NRDC Report. New York: Natural Resource Defense Council.
- Newsome, R., C. G. Balestrini, M. D. Baum, J. Corby, W. Fisher, K. Goodburn, T. P. Labuza, G. Prince, H. S. Thesmar, and F.

Yiannas. 2014. Applications and perceptions of date labeling of food. *Comprehensive Reviews in Food Science and Food Safety* 13:745–769.

WRAP (Waste and Resources Action Programme). 2011. *Consumer insight: Date labels and storage guidance*. Banbury, UK: Waste and Resources Action Programme.

Suggested Citation

Yiannas, F. 2016. *Food is too important to waste*. Commentary, National Academy of Medicine, Washington, DC. <http://nam.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/01/Food-is-too-important-to-waste.pdf>

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this Perspective are those of the author and not necessarily of the author's organization or of the National Academy of Medicine (NAM). The Perspective is intended to help inform and stimulate discussion. It has not been subjected to the review procedures of, nor is it a report of, the NAM or the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. Copyright by the National Academy of Sciences. All rights reserved.