



Food waste in Europe: statistics and facts about the problem

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Would you go into a supermarket, buy three shopping bags of food, and then immediately throw one away? Statistically, that's what's happening to our food today. One third of all the food that is produced for human consumption is wasted. When we waste food, we waste all the resources that go into producing and transporting the food, such as land, water and fuel use, without gaining any of the benefits of feeding people. When food ends up in landfill it also contributes to greenhouse gas emissions. Food waste remains a problem in Europe and around the world.

What is the difference between food waste and food loss?

In order to tackle food waste, understanding the problem is key to finding good solutions. A first step is to measure the amount of food that goes to waste and to understand where along the supply chain the waste is happening. Depending on where it happens along the supply chain, we use the terms food loss or food waste.

- **Food loss** refers to any food that is discarded, incinerated or otherwise disposed of along the food supply chain from harvest/slaughter/catch up to, but excluding, the retail level, and is not used for any other productive use, such as animal feed or seed.¹
- **Food waste** refers to food that is discarded at the level of retailers, food service providers and consumers. Food is wasted in many ways, for example
 - Fresh produce that deviates from what is considered optimal (e.g. size, shape or colour) and is removed during sorting actions
 - Foods that are discarded by retailers or consumers when it's close to or beyond the best before date.
 - Unused or leftover food that is thrown out from households or restaurants.¹

The UN Sustainable Development Goal 12.3 aims to halve food waste at the retail and consumer level and to reduce food loss across supply chains. Measuring food loss and waste on a national, regional and global scale is not easy, but methodologies and tools are being developed in order to allow us to measure progress.² Below, we list some of key statistics and facts about food waste and

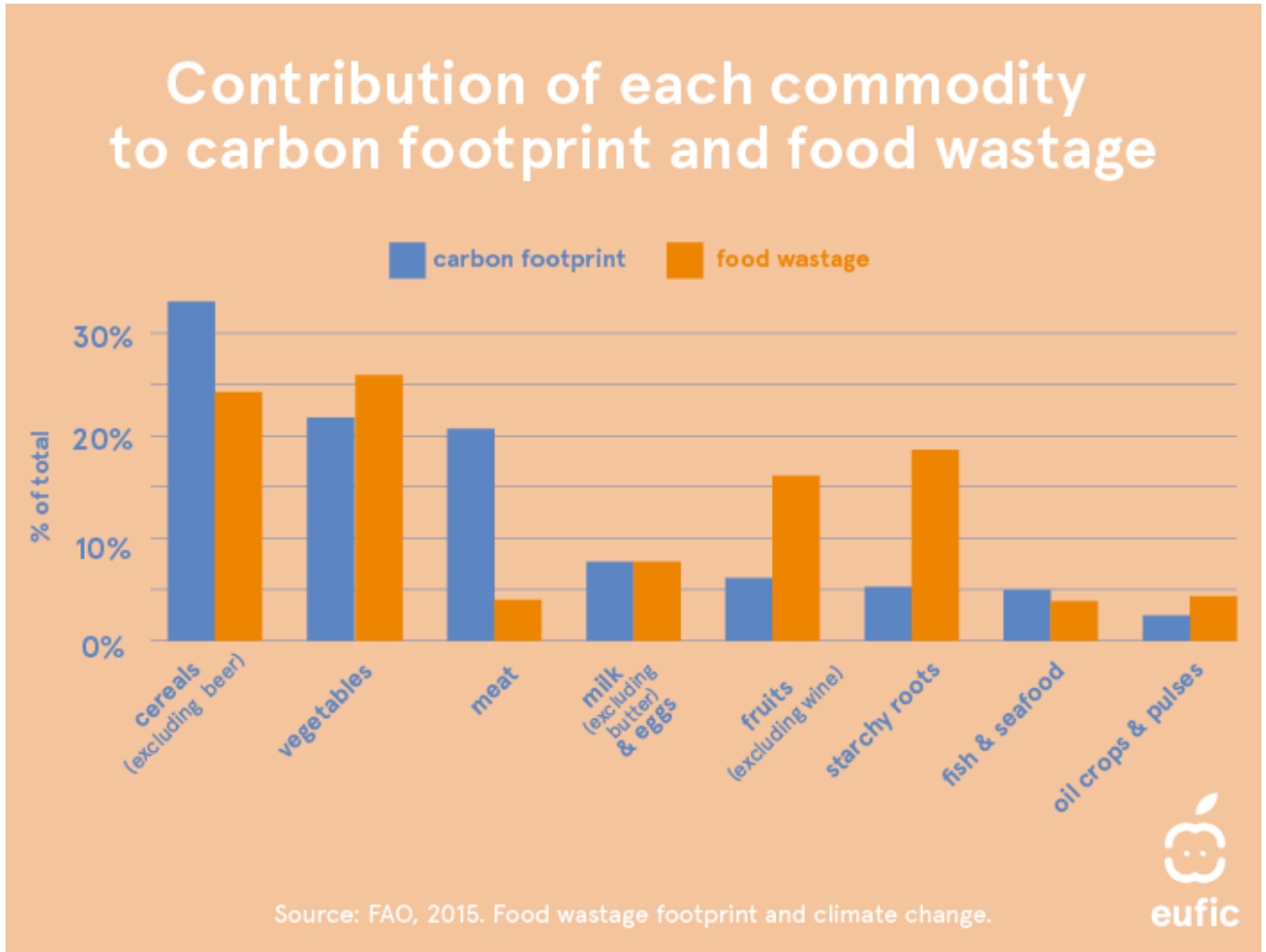
loss based on current estimates.

- Roughly 1/3 of the food produced in the world for human consumption is lost or wasted.³
- Food waste alone generates about 8% - 10% of global greenhouse gas emissions.²
- If food waste were a country, it would be the third largest emitting country in the world.² In other words: food waste emits more greenhouse gases than all single countries in the world except China and the US.



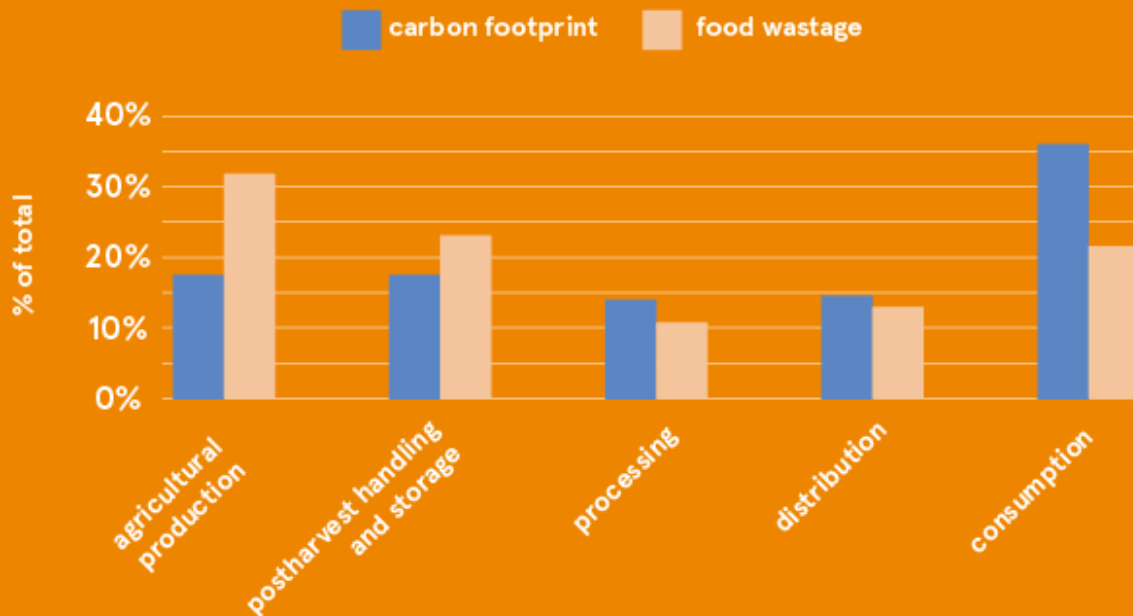
- Latest estimates suggest that around 931 million tonnes of food waste were generated in 2019, out of which:
 - 61% came from households
 - 26% from food service
 - 13% from retail.²
- Previous estimates of consumer food waste significantly underestimated its scale: despite data uncertainties, food waste at consumer level (household and food service) appears to be more than twice the amount than what was estimated by the FAO in 2011.²
- Around 88 million tonnes of food waste are generated annually in the EU.⁴ This is equal to
 - 174 kg per person or
 - 143 billion euros or
 - 170 000 000 tonnes of CO₂.⁴
- Estimates show that up to 10% of the 88 million tonnes of food waste that is generated in the EU every year are somehow linked to [date labelling](#):⁵
 - 53% of consumers don't know the meaning of "best before" labelling,⁶
 - 60% of consumers don't know the meaning of "use by" labelling⁶
- Levels of food waste are similar in high, upper-middle and lower-middle income countries in Europe.²
- The EU's Farm to Fork Strategy has set reduction of food loss and waste as an important part of the strategy and proposes to set legally binding targets to reduce food waste across the EU by 2023.

- The further along the supply chain the food loss occurs, the more carbon intensive the loss and waste. That's because more resources have gone into producing for example tomato sauce (processing, transport, retail and packaging, in addition to land and water use and farming) that we can buy in the supermarket than has gone into a tomato picked directly from the field. If we waste tomato sauce, we waste the additional resources that have accumulated along the supply chain.⁷



- Different foods have different environmental impacts. For example, the volume of meat that is wasted and lost is not very high compared to foods such as cereals and vegetables. However, meat requires much more resources to produce, so wasting meat still has a significant impact on climate change (estimated to contribute to 20% of the carbon footprint of total food waste and loss).⁷

Contribution of each phase of the food supply chain to carbon footprint and food wastage



Source: FAO, 2015. Food wastage footprint and climate change.



We, as consumers, can have a direct impact on the food waste problem by paying attention to our own behaviour. If you want to reduce your food waste at home, you can read more about it and get some tips [here](#).

References

1. [FAO. Food loss and food waste.](#)
2. [United Nations Environment Programme \(2021\) Food Waste Index Report 2021.](#)
3. [FAO \(2011\) Global Food Losses and Food Waste. Extent, Causes and Prevention.](#)
4. [Stenmarck, Å., et al. \(2016\) Estimates of European food waste levels. Report from the EU FUSIONS project.](#)
5. [European Commission. Date marking and food waste](#)
6. European Commission (2015) Flash Eurobarometer 425: Food waste and date marking.
7. [FAO \(2015\) Food wastage footprint and climate change.](#)