

Let's reduce food waste

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Every day, large quantities of food are wasted. Reducing food waste would save money and natural resources, and help feed those in need. In recognition of this global issue, EUFIC has joined the [SAVE FOOD initiative](#), to raise awareness of food waste, its impact, and possible solutions.

What a waste!

In Europe, an estimated 88 million tonnes of food is discarded every year. Across the food-abundant nations of Europe, a large proportion comes from households (47 million tonnes!)¹, but food is wasted at all stages of the food chain - by producers, processors, retailers, and caterers.¹

Food waste spoils valuable resources used in food production (water, energy, work, money), and produces additional CO₂ in rotting landfills, strongly contributing to climate change. According to the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO), if food waste was a country, it would be the third largest producer of CO₂ after the USA and China.²

Food waste also raises ethical concerns as valuable nutrients and calories are removed from the global supply, while nearly 1 billion people are under- or malnourished.³

Reduction of food waste is high on the agendas of global and EU Institutions. The European Commission has committed to meeting Sustainable Development Goals to halve food waste at the retail and consumer level by 2030.⁴ This ambition requires concerted efforts from the whole food supply chain, including us at home.⁵

Why is food wasted?

In manufacturing and retail

Most wastage in manufacturing is technical, resulting from overproduction, misshapen, or damaged items. Wholesalers and retailers face logistical challenges, including stock management (anticipating demand and correct storage), meeting product quality expectations, and coordination between sectors. Retailers feel pressure to keep their shelves well stocked, and offer a variety of products and brands, to keep customers satisfied.

In catering and at home

Household waste is influenced by climate, socio-economic status, and culture (the custom to generously prepare more food than can be eaten, for example).

A main cause of avoidable waste is leftover food on plates, or from cooking, or food not being used in time.⁶ The most wasted foods are cereal products (e.g. bread), fresh fruits, vegetables and tubers (e.g. potatoes).³ Here, waste mainly relates to our lack of awareness and practical food management skills - poor planning, buying too much, large portion sizes.⁶ Confusion over date-labelling also remains an issue. For instance, about a third of food is discarded before the 'best before' date in the UK and Ireland.^{7,8,9}

Better knowledge and improved [storage practices](#) could help reduce waste (see our [tips to reduce food waste](#)), but further country-level research is needed to inform targeted prevention strategies.

Tackling food waste

The EU Waste Framework Directive 2008/98/EC, gives priority to waste reduction, followed by re-use, recycling, and recovery, with disposal as a last resort.¹⁰ Efforts to reduce waste are followed by redistribution of edible food first to people, then to animals and industry.

['SAVE FOOD'](#) is a global initiative by the FAO that supports the implementation of food waste reduction projects and initiatives at national and regional levels. Across Europe, they support over a hundred initiatives, with EUFIC's awareness raising campaign being one of them.¹¹

Measuring food waste

Standardised national methods for measuring waste would allow for a better identification of where most food is wasted, and facilitate targeted prevention strategies.¹ However, standardised data is lacking, particularly in the agricultural, processing, and retail sectors. Audits that identify where food is being lost would also increase efficiency, while also providing an economic incentive.¹²

Raising awareness and education campaigns

People are often unaware of the amount of food wasted, and its impact on the environment and their wallets. Food waste collections could offer environmental benefits (by reusing it instead of adding to landfills), while the act of separating food from other waste raises awareness of the amount wasted. However, the effect of food waste collections on awareness and waste reduction has yet to be quantified.⁶

Many campaigns and initiatives try to get people to reduce food waste, and offer practical solutions - for households and retailers, on local or national levels, educational initiatives, and awareness campaigns. For example:

- The UK-based Waste & Resources Action Programme (WRAP) campaign ('Love Food, Hate Waste') has recorded a 17% reduction in avoidable household waste in 2015 compared to 2007.¹³ WRAP found that people who plan, create shopping lists and monitor what food they have, waste less than 'spontaneous shoppers'.⁸ People are encouraged to use leftovers and food that is near its expiry date in new recipes. Raising awareness at consumer level may also raise awareness within

the supply chain.

- In 2009, the local authority of Brussels (Bruxelles Environnement) used cooking classes to train 1000 people in waste-minimising habits.⁶ The European Parliament has recommended this practical training to be incorporated into school curricula.⁴ There are similar educational opportunities in the hospitality industry where caterers are taught how to minimise waste by anticipating demand, informed by reservations and customer feedback surveys.⁶
- Stop Wasting Food is a Danish voluntary initiative that offers guidance on how to avoid waste, and promotes better household planning and shopping patterns.³ It has contributed to the 25% reduction in food waste in Denmark between 2010 and 2015.¹⁴ It supports supermarket chains in setting up waste reducing strategies and has introduced ‘doggy bags’ to over 300 restaurants, a practice that is increasing in popularity in the EU.

Date stamps – source of information or source of confusion?

Several [date stamps](#) may be found on food labels: ‘best before’, ‘use by’, ‘sell by’, ‘display until’, but they are not used consistently.

Currently, legislation on the provision of food information to consumers defines the ‘use by’ date as a safety indicator for highly perishable foods. After this date, they are deemed unsafe and should not be eaten even if their appearance is unchanged.^{10,15} The ‘best before’ date is a quality indicator. After the best before date, food is unlikely to cause harm but quality (taste, texture etc.) may be affected.

Where necessary, advice on storage conditions must accompany the date. Advice on freezing should be harmonised to allow people to safely and confidently freeze food.¹⁵

Inedible – or just unwanted?

Throwaways can include edible food rejected because of appearance. European law on fruit and vegetable quality has been relaxed to allow the sale of less-aesthetic produce³, but there may still be reluctance to buying them. Campaigns like [‘Inglorious Fruits and Vegetables’](#) (Intermarché, France) and [‘Wonky Veg’](#) boxes (Asda, UK) try to change the “beauty” perception.

Price promotions for foods that are slightly damaged or nearing their expiry date also help reduce food waste.⁵ Innovative apps such as [‘No Food Wasted’](#) in the Netherlands, [‘Food Loop’](#) in Germany and [‘Too Good to Go’](#) in the UK, are connecting customers with supermarkets and restaurants to alert them to deals or surplus food available for collection.

Several countries (e.g. Austria, Denmark, Italy, Spain, UK) have successful food bank programmes, in which excess food is transported from retailers or other sales outlets (e.g. discount stores or local markets) to people in need. Social enterprises like [‘Food Cloud’](#) (Ireland) and ‘Buon fine’ (Italy) link retailers to charities. In 2017, France became the first country to put a nationwide ban on supermarkets throwing away food still safe to eat. Instead, they must commit to donate the food to a charity organisation.¹⁶

Savings all round

Unless we find better solutions, food waste will continue to rise with population growth, demand for food, and increasing affluence.⁶ A “waste no food” attitude will make a difference to our purses, but, more importantly, to the environment and global economy. We all need to step up the game, every single contribution counts.

Further information

1. [Love Food Hate Waste \(UK\)](#)
2. [Too Good to Waste \(UK\)](#)
3. [Wonky veg boxes \(UK\)](#)
4. [FoodWaste \(Ireland\)](#)
5. [Stop Food Waste \(Ireland\)](#)
6. [Inglorious fruits & vegetables \(France\)](#)
7. [Stop Spild Af Mad \(Denmark\)](#)
8. [Eten Is Om Op Te Eten \(Netherlands\)](#)
9. [Slang Inte Maten \(Sweden\)](#)