Fact Sheet
This fact sheet is provided to help IFT members when communicating about date labeling. The facts focus on the issue itself. Additional points are provided to address how IFT has been involved in the issue. Others are updates on relatively recent developments relating to the issue. IFT’s vision and mission are also noted.

Important Facts

- Misunderstanding of the meaning of different dates labels (also referred to as date marking or “code dating”) on packaged food contributes to food waste, which is a substantial, global issue, particularly given the extent of hunger and malnutrition, and the desire for a sustainable food supply to meet the needs of our increasing population.
- Estimates of the amount of food lost or wasted per year on a global scale are in the range of a third of the food supply, which has an estimated annual value of more than $200 billion in the United States and 1 trillion dollars globally.
- The regulatory frameworks for date labeling of foods vary around the world; and within these, date labeling may be based on nutrition, quality, safety, or a combination of these purposes.
- Because date labeling terminology and uses vary, their meaning is often misunderstood. This misinterpretation leads to not only food waste, but also unnecessary financial burden for consumers, needless use of limited resources at the retail level (e.g., regulatory inspection focused on food quality-related dates rather than public health-related dates), and potential for food safety risk associated with perishable foods.
- This issue continues to be a visible one. In the United States, a bipartisan bill — “The Food Donation Act of 2017” — was put forward; the bill would extend liability protection in donating wholesome food to those in need and address labeling on food for donation that is not related to safety. Also, Rep. Pingree plans to reintroduce the “Food Date Labeling Act,” which sought consistency and clarity in food date labeling for safety vs. quality.
- The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) announced (in December 2016) that it revised its guidance on date labeling, recommending that food manufacturers and retailers use one phrase — “Best if Used By” — for date labeling. The USDA also made other changes, to facilitate food donation to food banks.
- In early 2017, the Grocery Manufacturers Association announced that grocery manufacturers and retailers were joining together to encourage adoption of standard wording about quality and safety on packaging, represented with the phrases “Best if Used By” and “Use By,” respectively. “Best if Used By” is intended to refer to expected product quality attributes (e.g., taste or performance) rather than safety; and “Use By” is intended to indicate for highly perishable products which may have a food safety concern over time when the food should be discarded.
- At the international level, the Codex Alimentarius Commission has been working to revise its General Standard for the Labelling of Prepackaged Foods: Date Marking. In mid-2018, the Commission will consider adoption of the revised standard, which would eliminate the definition of “Sell-by” date and retain definition of two separate date marks — “Best-before date”/“Best-quality-before date” (beyond which the food may be acceptable for consumption) and “Use-by date”/“Expiration date” (after which the product should not be sold or consumed due to safety and quality reasons).
- Thus, there is momentum toward the following date label meanings:
“Best if used by” is for quality. Contents may still be okay to eat after the date.
“Use by” may refer to quality or safety. Products with these dates should be consumed or frozen by this date or discarded afterwards.
If used, “sell-by” dates are for the attention of those working at the retail level, not consumers.

Other Potentially Useful Facts
IFT collaborated with a group of experts in academia, the food industry, the regulatory community, food banking, and consulting to put forward science-based information on this topic to support science and risk-based decision making. This effort led to IFT publishing in 2014 the article—Applications and perceptions of date labeling of food—in its peer-reviewed journal Comprehensive Reviews in Food Science & Food Safety.

These experts called for the food industry to collaborate to:

• find a simple, workable solution to the challenges that date labeling causes for stakeholders (food manufacturers, retailers, government officials, consumers, and others), and
• develop a more consistent best practices date-marking system that considers storage instructions on packages.

They also emphasized that:

• consumer education on date labeling and how it relates to food quality and safety is needed
• regulatory agencies should revisit the emphasis they place on the issue of food date labeling at retail, and where appropriate, shift excessive resources that are used for food quality date labeling to more significant health and safety risks
• federal and state approaches to date labeling should be coordinated, and allow for collaborative industry-led development to achieve uniformity, and
• indicator technologies (such as time and temperature monitoring devices) for use on packaging should continue to be pursued, and other improvements along the supply chain that monitor temperature and storage information should be implemented to allow better tracking of true shelf life, especially for fresh produce.

IFT is actively involved in Codex and contributed to discussion of the revision of General Standard for the Labelling of Prepackaged Foods: Date Marking.

IFT Vision: A world where science and innovation are universally accepted as essential to a safe, nutritious and sustainable food supply for everyone.

IFT Mission: To advance the science of food and its application across the global food system.
Bibliography


