

Food Dating and Food Waste

For a country so obsessed with food, it is alarming how much of it Americans throw away, despite the serious ethical, environmental, and financial implications of this waste. An estimated 40% of food in the United States goes uneaten (Hall et al., 2009), with the average American consumer wasting 10 times as much as food as the average consumer in Southeast Asia (Gunders, 2012).

The cost of this waste—estimated to be about \$165 billion in the U.S.—is even more egregious when the resources used to produce, store, transport, and handle that food are considered. In fact, it is estimated that approximately 25% of America's freshwater use goes into the production of wasted food (Hall et al., 2009).

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This waste occurs alongside hunger. Redistributing a third of all the food lost in the United States is estimated to be enough to feed every one of the 50 million food insecure Americans their total diet (Gunders, 2012) (USDA/ERS, 2012). Redistributing only 2% of food waste could provide the needed calories/day/person to lift all food insecure Americans above the hunger line (White, 2012).

Misinterpretation of the date labels on foods is a key factor leading to this waste. A recent study, "The Dating Game: How Confusing Food Date Labels Lead to Food Waste in America,"

released by Harvard Law School and the Natural Resources Defense Council provides a legal analysis of food date label laws across the U.S. and illustrates pervasive confusion among industry and consumers, ultimately leading to significant amounts of food going to waste.

Consumers are faced with a range of phrases and dates stamped on food products—"sell by," "use by," "best before." Believing the dates to indicate food is unsafe, they err on the side of caution by discarding food when it is often still good to eat. One industry survey showed that 91% of consumers had thrown away food out of concern for its safety when the date they referred to was the "sell by" date—a date actually intended to

communicate to the retailer that the product beyond that date still had shelf life remaining but not at the quality level the company desired to present to consumers. In fact, the former CEO of Trader Joes is creating a store concept that will sell past dated food, something already in existence for food salvage stores (FMI Research, 2011).

A different study showed that 54% of consumers believed that eating food past its sell by/use by date constituted a health risk (Ransom, 2005). In addition to throwing food away prematurely, consumers may potentially

consume unsafe food if they trust too much in the date and ignore how the food has been handled. Products that are inadvertently temperature abused in distribution, retail, and home storage do pose an unknown risk.

From the outside, there appears to be a rational, objective system behind these dates. However, in reality, there is no federal government oversight or other guidance that would establish consistency, except for required dating of infant foods because the nutrients decline over time, not because of concern over foodborne illness. Without federal mandates, states have vast discretion to regulate date labels in almost any way they see fit and those set ignore the problem of temperature abuse, a real

coherent system for food date labels would serve everyone better. It should provide more clear communication to consumers about the meaning behind the dates and establish consistent language and best practices for determining those dates. **FT**

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