

You're Throwing Away \$2,275 Every Year on This

BY EMILY MAIN

Here's a depressing statistic: Forty percent of the food produced in the United States goes into landfills instead of our mouths, according to a report from Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC). That massive quantity of food, which amounts to 20 pounds per person per month, uses 25 percent of our country's freshwater supplies.

And national and international leaders are finally starting to get fed up about it. Food waste was the focus of the United Nations Environment Programme's World Environment Day 2013, and the US Department of Agriculture and Environmental Protection Agency recently made it the focus of a new campaign aimed at getting everyone, from farmers to processors to people, to cut down on wasted food, which wastes more than just water. Food waste consumes huge quantities of oil—185 million barrels of it every year—which is used to make the fertilizers and pesticides used on non-organic farms.

What's driving all this food waste? Every hand that touches food, from farmer to shopper, is partly responsible. For instance, low commodity prices on certain foods can mean that it's cheaper for a farmer to leave a field unharvested than to pay for labor, packaging, and shipping to a distributor.

Grocery stores follow the "pile it high, watch it fly" philosophy, which means they stock shelves to overflowing in an effort to get people to buy more food. In fact, the NRDC report's authors noted, waste at grocery stores is often considered a good thing because managers view it as a sign that the store is meeting quality-control and full-shelf standards. One source cited in NRDC's report estimated that one in seven truckloads of perishable foods sent to grocery stores is thrown away.

Restaurants serve enormous portions, and 55 percent of diners' leftovers are left behind. In addition to wasted dinners, the demand for extensive menus means that restaurant kitchens need a lot of perishable foods on hand to meet potential demand. Buffet-style restaurants are the worst, the report found, because uneaten food can't be donated due to health-code restrictions.

However, we the people waste the most food waste. The average family of four wastes 25 percent of its purchased food. That's \$1,365 to \$2,275 we spend every year on food that winds up in the garbage. The USDA offers a more conservative estimate that each consumer spends \$390 on wasted food. Whichever figure you believe, it's good money being funneled straight to landfills (oh, and the USDA also calculates that \$2 billion of US taxpayer money is spent trucking food to landfills).

The most wasteful food category is fruits and vegetables, perhaps not surprisingly. Of all the fresh produce grown every year, just 48 percent is consumed. The other 52 percent is wasted. Seafood is another big loser: Fifty percent of it is wasted. Meat and milk fare slightly better, with 78 and 80 percent consumed, respectively.