



NATURAL RESOURCES DEFENSE COUNCIL
THE EARTH'S BEST DEFENSE

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES: FOOD AND AGRICULTURE

Wasted: How America Is Losing Up to 40 Percent of Its Food from Farm to Fork to Landfill

Food is simply too good to waste. Even the most sustainably farmed food does us no good if the food is never eaten. Getting food to our tables eats up 10 percent of the total U.S. energy budget, uses 50 percent of U.S. land, and swallows 80 percent of freshwater consumed in the United States. Yet, 40 percent of food in the United States today goes uneaten. That is more than 20 pounds of food per person every month. Not only does this mean that Americans are throwing out the equivalent of \$165 billion each year, but also 25 percent of all freshwater and huge amounts of unnecessary chemicals, energy, and land. Moreover, almost all of that uneaten food ends up rotting in landfills where it accounts for almost 25 percent of U.S. methane emissions.

Nutrition is also lost in the mix -- food saved by reducing losses by just 15 percent could feed more than 25 million Americans every year at a time when one in six Americans lack a secure supply of food to their tables. Given all the resources demanded for food production, it is critical to make sure that the least amount possible is needlessly squandered on its journey to our plates.

Identifying Efficiency Losses in the U.S. Food System

This paper examines the inefficiencies in the U.S. food system from the farm to the fork to the landfill. By identifying food losses at every level of the food supply chain, this report provides the latest recommendations and examples of emerging solutions, such as making "baby carrots" out of carrots too bent (or "curvy") to meet retail standards. By increasing the efficiency of our food system, we can make better use of our natural resources, provide financial saving opportunities along the entire supply chain, and enhance our ability to meet food demand.

The average American consumer wastes 10 times as much food as someone in Southeast Asia, up 50 percent from Americans in the 1970s. This means there was once a time when we wasted far less, and we can get back there again. Doing so will ultimately require a suite of coordinated solutions, including changes in supply-chain operation, enhanced market incentives, increased public awareness and adjustments in consumer behavior.

Much can be learned from work that is already under way in Europe. Both the United Kingdom and the European Union have conducted research to better understand the drivers of the problem and identify potential solutions. In January 2012, the European Parliament adopted a resolution to reduce food waste by 50 percent by 2020 and designated 2014 as the "European year against food waste." An extensive U.K. public awareness campaign called "Love Food Hate Waste" has been conducted over the past five years and 53 of the leading food retailers and brands there have adopted a resolution to reduce waste in their own operations, as well as upstream and downstream in the supply chain.