

# Reducing food waste



As much as 40 percent of food produced in the U.S. for human consumption goes uneaten, and worldwide, one-third of food is wasted. About 36 million tons of food waste are generated in the United States each year. Food waste has increased significantly in recent years. Food waste per capita in the U.S. increased 50 percent from 1974 to 2009 according to the National Institute of Health.

According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, food waste is the single largest component of garbage being sent to landfills and incinerators. Locally, food scraps and non-recyclable paper make up about one-third of what we throw in the garbage at home.

## Environmental and economic impacts

Wasting food wastes resources that go into producing, packaging and transporting food. Additionally, there are many agricultural inputs used to produce food that emit greenhouse gases and impact soil and water, making wasting food an environmental threat. Food disposed of in a landfill quickly rots and becomes a significant source of methane, a potent greenhouse gas. Landfills are the largest source of human-related methane in the United States, accounting for more than 20 percent of all methane emissions.

Wasted food in the U.S. is valued at \$165 billion annually, representing a significant waste of money for households and businesses. Households are responsible for throwing away approximately \$43 billion worth of food, and this doesn't include plate scrapings, garbage disposal waste or composting. On average, American households throw away 14 percent of the food purchased, an average of nearly \$1,500 worth of edible food a year for a family of four.

## Social and ethical impacts

The issue of wasted food is often juxtaposed with hunger and food insecurity. Every day, 980 million people go hungry in the world even though there is no shortage of food. In the U.S., 1 in 6 people don't have enough food. There are ways to help distribute food to people who are dealing with hunger issues, including donating unused food to a local food shelf and encouraging local restaurants and grocery stores to donate unused food.

## Sources of food waste

Food waste is generated from many sources, including food manufacturing and processing facilities, supermarkets, institutions such as schools and hospitals, restaurants, and households. Because so much food is wasted at home, consumers play an important role in the food-waste equation and must be part of the solution. According to the Natural Resources Defense Council, the reasons consumers waste food include:

- Lack of awareness and undervaluing of food
- Confusion over dates on labels
- Impulse and bulk purchases
- Poor planning
- Cooking too much at once
- Forgetting about leftovers

By increasing awareness and taking some simple steps, households can significantly reduce the amount of food and money wasted every year.

## Web resources

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency  
[www.epa.gov/foodrecovery](http://www.epa.gov/foodrecovery)

Natural Resources Defense Council  
[www.nrdc.org/food/files/wasted-food-ip.pdf](http://www.nrdc.org/food/files/wasted-food-ip.pdf)

West Coast Climate & Materials Management Forum  
[westcoastclimateforum.com/food](http://westcoastclimateforum.com/food)

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations  
[www.fao.org/home/en](http://www.fao.org/home/en)

Save the Food  
[www.savethefood.com](http://www.savethefood.com)