



Food Waste in America in 2020:

Statistics & Facts

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Whether you're vegetarian, paleo, vegan — or you go for the gusto and eat everything (in moderation, of course) — the truth is that an astounding amount of food in America goes to waste. Though food waste is often brought up around the holidays, as they are particularly wasteful, it's not only then that we waste massive quantities of food. We're wasteful **every single day** of the year.

The facts: How much food is wasted in America

Just how much food do Americans waste? Here's some "food" for thought: The United States is the

global leader in food waste, with Americans discarding nearly 40 million tons of food every year.¹ That's 80 billion pounds of food and equates to more than \$161 billion², approximately 219 pounds³ of waste per person and 30-40 percent⁴ of the US food supply. Most of this food is sent to landfills; **food is the single largest component taking up space inside US landfills.**⁵ In fact, it makes up 22 percent of municipal solid waste (MSW).⁶

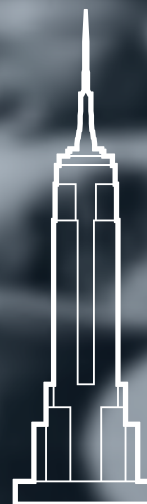
^{1, 5, 6} Environmental Protection Agency

^{2, 3} U.S. Department of Agriculture

⁴ U.S. Food & Drug Administration

80
billion lbs
of food is thrown away
each year in the US.

FOR REFERENCE



This is the equivalent
of 1,000 Empire State
Buildings.

NEARLY

40%

of the US food supply is
wasted each year.

219 lbs
per person

The amount of food wasted annually.

\$1,600
per family

The amount of produce thrown away each year.

Why do we waste so much food?

With 37 million people across America — including 11 million children — suffering from food insecurity, why do Americans waste so much of their food abundance? Getting to the bottom of what causes food waste in America is a challenge that traverses the complex landscapes of socioeconomic disparities, confusion, and ingrained beliefs, layered with human behaviors and habits.

› Food spoilage, whether real or perceived, is one of the biggest reasons people throw out food. More than 80 percent of Americans discard perfectly good, consumable food simply because they **misunderstand expiration labels**. Labels like “sell by”, “use by”, “expires on”, “best before” or “best by” are confusing to people — and in an effort to not risk the potential of a foodborne illness, they’ll just toss it in the garbage.

› Compared to the rest of the world, food in the United States is plentiful and less costly, and often this contributes to a general sentiment of not **appreciating or valuing it** the way other cultures around the globe do.



› Americans are often impulsive in their food purchases, unrealistically assessing how much food is required, and as a result buying **more food than they need** or buying food they won’t actually eat.

› Our take-out society doesn’t use food in its entirety the way our ancestors used to. We underutilize leftovers and toss food scraps that can **still be consumed or composted**.

› **Composting** isn’t part of our food-prep routine, so we continue to add fuel to the fire in increasing the sheer size of US landfills.

Changing the laws to curb so much waste

The good news is that several states across the country are taking action to curb food waste and gain food recovery. Legislators in California, Connecticut, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, and Vermont have passed laws that restrict the amount of food waste going to landfills⁷, with Vermont establishing a Universal Recycling Law that bans food scrap waste altogether by the end of this year.

There is pending legislation in California, Colorado and Massachusetts that would establish programs to fund private-sector composting and organic collection programs.⁸ In addition, several states like Tennessee and Washington, and cities like Los Angeles and Madison, Wisconsin, have created food waste task forces to reduce waste, creating composting education and infrastructure and eliminating food waste from US landfills.

Last year, the New York City Department of Sanitation expanded upon their organics separation rules, proposing that even more food-related businesses would be required to separate organic waste in an effort to keep nearly 100,000 tons of wasted food out of landfills each year.

The city and state efforts are trickling into US school systems too — both Maine and Rhode Island have introduced legislation to reduce the amount of food waste in schools. On a national level, the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) set a goal in 2015 to **reduce food waste by half by 2030**.

^{7, 8} National Conference of State Legislatures

Wasting food has environmental repercussions...

While the food waste movement across America is gaining momentum, it needs to pick up speed to help tackle one of the globe's most pressing problems: climate change. Wasting food has irreversible environmental consequences: it wastes the water and energy it took to produce it, and generates greenhouse gases — **7 percent of the world's emissions**⁹ — like methane, carbon dioxide and chlorofluorocarbons, which contribute to global warming. Food that sits decaying in landfills also produces nitrogen pollution, which causes algae blooms and dead zones. According to the World Wildlife Federation, the production of wasted food in the United States is equivalent to the greenhouse emissions of **37 million cars**. If Americans continue on the same path of food loss, the environmental impact could be disastrous.

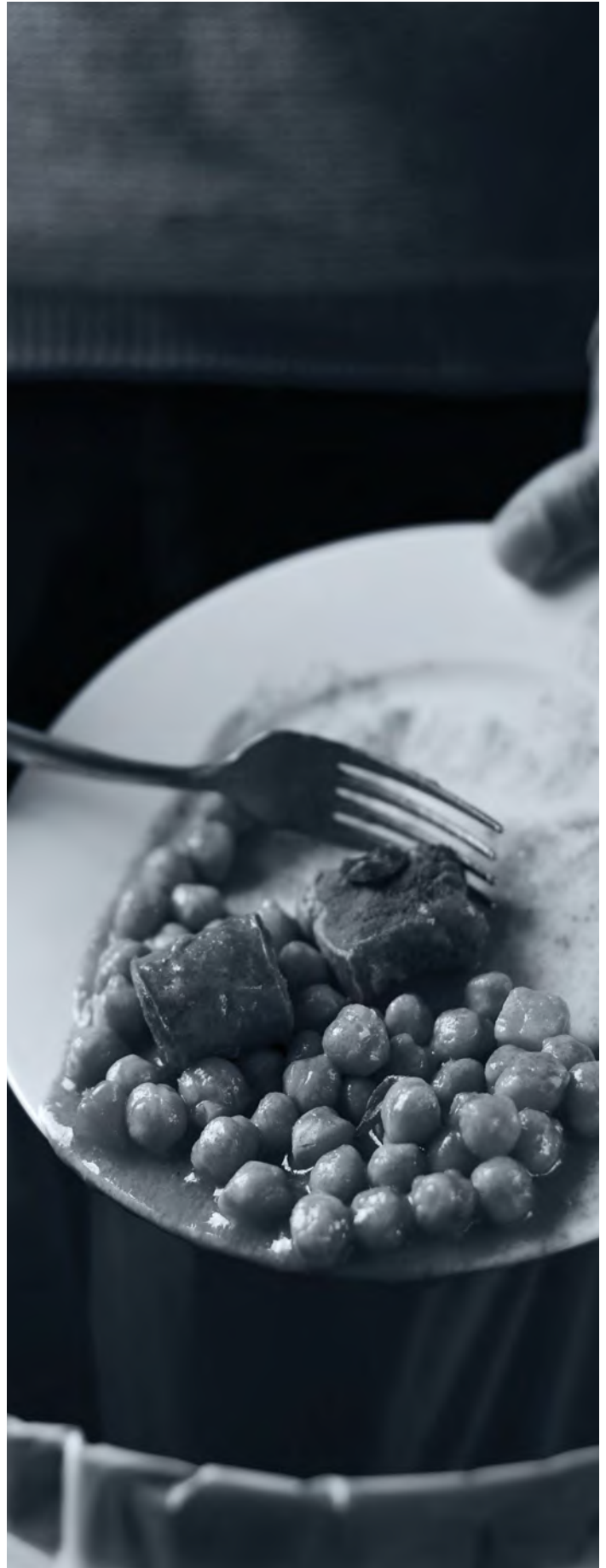
The average American family of four throws out **\$1,600 a year in produce**.¹⁰

...and economic repercussions too

If reducing food insecurity and saving the planet aren't enough to inspire action to reduce food waste, perhaps one more good reason will: money. According to the US Department of Agriculture (USDA), Americans waste more than **\$161 billion each year** on food, with dairy products being the food item we toss out the most. The average American family of four throws out \$1,600 a year in produce.¹⁰ Multiply that by the typical 18 years that a child lives at home and you could easily pay for a **year's worth of tuition** at any number of America's private colleges or universities.

⁹ United Nations

¹⁰ Environmental Protection Agency



Confronting Waste and Solving the Problem at Home

So how do we tackle food waste in America? The challenge isn't to produce more food, but to waste less in the process. Here's how we can start:



1. Don't misinterpret expiration labels on food that's perfectly good to eat.

The Grocery Manufacturers Association, the Food Marketing Institute, and Harvard University have combined efforts to streamline expiration labels about the quality and safety of food. Two phrases simplify how you can tell what's still good to consume:

“Best if used by” describes quality “where the product may not taste or perform as expected but is safe to consume”;

“Use by” applies to “the few products that are highly perishable and/or have food safety concern over time.”¹¹

2. Learn how to compost to keep food scraps out of landfills, and the amount of greenhouse gases from rising.

3. Freeze food that can't be eaten immediately, but could be consumed at a later date.

4. Share the wealth.

Donate food to food pantries or deliver leftovers to people who may need it.

5. Plan meals and make deliberate grocery store shopping lists.

You'll save food and money.

6. Embrace imperfect produce.

Fruits and veggies with blemishes and flaws still taste the same and are typically a fraction of the cost.

¹¹ Natural Resources Defense Council

Reducing the Waste at America's Restaurants

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the average American household spends more than **\$3,000 a year** on eating out. This not only requires an astonishing amount of plastic packaging and utensils, but it also produces a lot of wasted food. The restaurant industry spends an estimated **\$162 billion every year** in costs related to wasted food.¹² Pioneers in the recycling industry are making great strides, but there is still more we can do to make progress.

1. Be thoughtful and deliberate when eating out.

Recognize that portion sizes differ and order only what you know will be eaten. If you end up with leftover food – and this happens often with today's enormous American food portions – take it home to share with someone else or to enjoy for another meal the next day.

If you really want to be environmentally conscientious, bring your own containers to take home leftover food. You'll be doing your part in reducing the **150 million tons of single-use plastic** that we use – and discard – every year.¹³

2. Reconsider the “all-you-can-eat” buffet-style restaurant model — and mindset.

It prompts people to take out more food than they can possibly eat, and that food almost always gets mindlessly thrown out after binging on that salad bar of deceptively “healthy” ingredients or all-you-can-eat sushi.

3. Follow a global model.

Some countries around the world are ahead of America when it comes to managing food waste. France, for example, requires restaurants to donate food that is at risk of being thrown out, but is still safe to eat. Cities in Sweden use food waste to create fuel to power public bus transit. In Denmark, you can use an app to find restaurants and bakeries that are about to close and purchase their remaining food at a fraction of the cost.

¹² U.S. Department of Agriculture



Reducing Food Waste in Commercial Businesses

When it comes to food waste, households and restaurants aren't the only contributors; commercial businesses also add to the growing problem of food waste.

Fortunately, there are many businesses that are taking notice. Companies are innovating new ways to use food waste as ingredients for other products, setting up food donation plans, or implementing commercial composting programs.

The Real Dill, a Denver-based pickle company, created a Bloody Mary mix out of the cucumber water used in making their popular pickles. Today, the mix is more well-known than the pickles – and the company has an even smaller environmental footprint. Similarly, Wtrmln Wtr is a company that takes watermelons that would normally be thrown out – and eventually end up in landfills – and creates a juice out of the melons. Companies aren't just creating food and beverage products – some are taking businesses' food waste and turning it into new products, like Ambrosia who is turning organic waste into a cleaning spray called Veles.

Transforming food that would otherwise be wasted into an upcycled product is just one way in which commercial businesses can reduce food waste. Companies can also work with their hauler partner to set up programs to make sure their organics are composted rather than sent to landfill. Finally, there are opportunities for commercial businesses to donate unused food like Sodexo has – donating all uneaten food to local communities in need. These are all programs that support the US Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) Food Recovery Challenge (FRC), which asks organizations and businesses to “pledge to improve their sustainable food management practices and report their results.”

Food waste statistics may seem overwhelming, but we can reduce food waste in the United States.

Similar to how we can prevent food waste at home, it's about making sure too much food isn't purchased, redirection (or donation) of unused food that would otherwise be wasted, and, setting up composting programs for food scraps that would end up in landfill.

Food waste statistics may seem overwhelming, but we can reduce food waste in the United States.

It's about everyone doing their part, from individuals to large corporations — taking responsibility and making small changes to create meaningful sustainable changes for the planet.

ABOUT RECYCLE TRACK SYSTEMS

Recycle Track Systems, Inc. is pioneering a better way to manage waste and recycling. RTS combines technology with high-touch service to make waste disposal easier, smarter, and more responsible. From on-demand removal to fully integrated waste management solutions, RTS helps companies and municipalities easily track and optimize their pickups. Using data insight, RTS empowers clients with visibility into their waste habits and offers tangible figures on their climate impact to improve their waste and recycling practices. RTS is a certified B-Corporation, reflecting its dedication and commitment to meeting stringent standards of environmental transparency and performance.