

NPR

It's Time To Get Serious About Reducing Food Waste, Feds Say

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Word that Americans throw away about one third of our available food has been getting around.

Now there's an official goal aimed at reducing that waste.

Today, the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the Environmental Protection Agency — along with many private-sector and food bank partners — announced the first ever national target for food waste.

"[We're] basically challenging the country to reduce food waste by 50 percent by the year 2030," Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack tells The Salt.

Currently, Vilsack says an estimated 133 billion pounds of food is wasted each year. And if that's hard to fathom, picture this: "It's enough to fill the Sears Tower [technically now called the Willis Tower] 44 times," Vilsack says.

As for who's responsible? Well, pretty much everyone who eats.

We consumers let a lot of food wilt or go sour in our refrigerators. And we may toss out items when they pass their sell-by dates — even though the food is still safe to consume.

On farms, there's a lot of waste...[F]ood not quite up to cosmetic standards isn't harvested. Often times, food also ends up in landfills because it won't stay fresh long enough to be shipped across the country.

Restaurants and grocery stores generate a lot of waste, too.

There are a lot of initiatives already underway to address food waste....

[I]ncreasingly, grocery stores are buying and selling imperfect, or ugly, produce....

Vilsack says food waste isn't just an economic issue — it also is a big contributor of methane, a potent greenhouse gas that fuels climate change. Think about where most of it tossed: "Basically, it ends up in landfills," Vilsack says. And it's the single greatest contributor to municipal landfills, according to USDA.

Here's another way to understand the significance of food waste: Tossing out food wastes fossil fuels used to grow and ship food....

For now, the national 50 percent waste reduction goal will be voluntary. But to meet it, Vilsack says, many of the initiatives already underway can be scaled up. "Rather than pitch [food], let's figure out how to redirect it," and salvage it, says Vilsack.

For instance, Americans need more education on how to shop and cook in ways that reduce the losses in our own refrigerators.

And schools, institutions and local governments can do a lot more to cut back on, recover and recycle food waste. In some states and cities, they're already required to....Seattle now fines homeowners for not sorting their garbage. And Massachusetts has implemented a food waste ban for certain institutions, with a handful of other states following suit....

Vilsack says the public awareness needed around food waste reminds him of another problem our nation tackled back in the 1960s and 1970s: litter.

There was a time when people rolled down their windows and tossed trash on to highways. "It was quite common when I was a kid," Vilsack says.

But now, this is not culturally acceptable. That's because there was a massive public education campaign. School kids were told to tell their parents to stop littering. And, Vilsack says, it was successful.

Now, he says, the goal is to "create a generation of Americans that are sensitive to food waste."

Readability Score: 8.9

1. Define: private sector, fathom, cosmetic, initiatives, methane, greenhouse gas, municipal, institutions, implemented, culturally
2. Who is declaring a national goal to reduce food waste? Why would they set a goal for other people's behavior--is this their responsibility? Why or why not?
3. Will the announcement of this goal have an impact on the amount of food people waste? Explain.
4. Why might food be safe to consume after its sell-by dates? Why do consumers throw it away anyway?
5. "Often times, food also ends up in landfills because it won't stay fresh long enough to be shipped across the country." Is this wasting it? Why or why not?
6. What are the costs to consumers of wasting food? What costs would be involved in making sure they never bought food that would go bad before they ate it?
7. "Americans need more education on how to shop and cook..." Do you agree? Why or why not?
8. In its nutrition guidelines, the federal government recommends that we eat plenty of fresh fruits and vegetables, which are highly perishable foods. Does it make sense for that same government to criticize people when some of these foods end up not being eaten before they spoil?
9. How do consumers pay for the food they waste and the landfill space they use? How do the resources used to transport food affect the price of food?

10. If these costs don't cause people to eliminate all food waste, why would Tom Vilsack think they are wrong?

"But now, [littering] is not culturally acceptable. That's because there was a massive public education campaign."

11. What does education mean in this context? What is the difference between an effort to improve people's knowledge or understanding and a campaign to change their actions?