

A Third of All Food Never Gets Eaten. How Can We Fix This?

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A Colombia banana plantation exports 200 tons a week, while 17 tons stay behind in a compost pile. They don't meet specifications set by most buyers: they must be a minimum of eight inches, though some brands accept them down to 6.5. Many more are rejected because they are too curved, too short, too thin, or have minor blemishes.

Imperfect oranges are separated from others during harvest in Peru. Globally, 46 percent of fruits and vegetables never make it from farm to table.

With governments fretting over how to feed more than nine billion people by 2050, a dominant narrative calls for increasing global food production by 70 to 100 percent. But agriculture already represents one of the greatest threats to planetary health. It is responsible for 70 percent of the planet's freshwater withdrawals, 80 percent of the world's tropical and subtropical deforestation, and 30 to 35 percent of human-caused greenhouse gas emissions.

Meanwhile, nearly 800 million people worldwide suffer from hunger. But according to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, we squander enough food—globally, 2.9 trillion pounds a year—to feed every one of them more than twice over. Where's all that food—about a third of the planet's production—going?

In developing nations much is lost postharvest for lack of adequate storage facilities, good roads, and refrigeration. In comparison, developed nations waste more food farther down the supply chain, when retailers order, serve, or display too much and when consumers ignore leftovers in the back of the fridge or toss perishables before they've expired.

Wasting food takes an environmental toll as well. Producing food that no one eats—whether sausages or snickerdoodles—also squanders the water, fertilizer, pesticides, seeds, fuel, and land needed to grow it. The quantities aren't trivial. If food waste were a country, it would be the third largest producer of greenhouse gases in the world, after China and the U.S. On a planet of finite resources, with the expectation of at least two billion more residents by 2050, this is obscene.

Others have been making similar arguments for years, but reducing food waste has become a matter of international urgency. Some U.S. schools, where children dump up to 40 percent of their lunches into the trash, are setting up sharing tables, letting students serve themselves portions they know they'll eat, allotting more time for lunch, and scheduling it after recess—all proven methods of boosting consumption. Countless businesses, such as grocery stores, restaurants, and cafeterias, have stepped forward to combat waste by quantifying how much edible food isn't consumed, optimizing their purchasing, shrinking portion sizes, and beefing up efforts to move excess to charities. Stuart himself has made a specialty of investigating conditions farther up the supply chain, where supermarket standards and ordering practices lead to massive, but mostly hidden, dumps of edible food.

By the end of 2015 the UN and the U.S. had pledged to halve food waste by 2030. The exact mechanisms of this ambitious goal haven't been spelled out. But already countries and companies are devising and adopting standardized metrics to quantify waste. If the target is met, enough food could be saved to feed at least one billion people.

Adapted from:

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/environment/urban-expeditions/austin/ugly-food-story-build/>