

Reduce Food Losses . . . Feed the Hungry

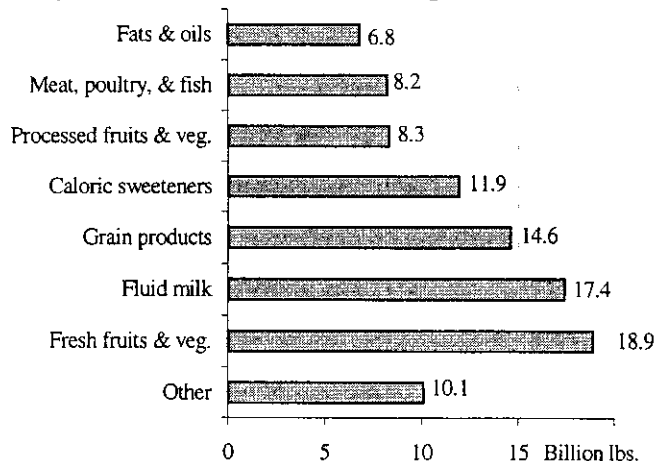
Karen Mundy

"Eat what's on your plate, or you can't have dessert." "Don't waste that food, there are starving children in . . . who would be happy to have it."

Foodbank of Southeastern Virginia reported that nearly 100,000 children in South Hampton Roads experience hunger each year; more than 1 million emergency meals a month are served in Virginia; and hunger seriously impacts 1 in 8 Virginia families (<http://www.communitylink.org/foodbank>, p. 1).

Food loss is a major problem in America. According to a recent USDA study, food losses exceed 28 percent of the available edible food supplies. More than 96 billion pounds of edible food was lost by retailers, foodservice, and consumers in 1995 (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Food losses, in billion pounds



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USDA acknowledges their estimates probably understate food losses because participants in household surveys on food waste will tend to understate the amount wasted or will, during the survey period, change their behavior so that they waste less than they otherwise might. Other reasons food losses are understated are that some food is fed to pets or put in the garbage disposal and there is no way to account for these losses. Institutional and foodservice losses are equally hard to estimate. But given the caveats of the study, the net results show that Americans waste a great deal of food: "If only 5 percent of the retail, foodservice, and consumer food losses in 1995 were recovered rather than discarded as solid waste, about \$50 million . . . could be saved in solid waste disposal costs for landfills alone." (Kantor, et al., p. 8) This estimate does not address the number of hungry people who could be fed, nor does it address the savings in money for providing food assistance.

Some foods can be recovered, but others cannot:

Not recoverable

Livestock condemned at slaughter due to disease
Diseased or otherwise unsafe produce
Spoiled perishable food, including meat, dairy, and prepared items
Plate waste from foodservice and institutional establishments

Losses of edible portions associated with processing: skin and fat from meat and poultry, peels from produce

Source: Kantor, et al., p. 3

Recoverable

Edible crops remaining in fields after harvest
Produce rejected because of blemishes, shape, etc.
Unsold fresh produce from wholesale or retail markets
Surplus perishable food from foodservice establishments, caterers, grocery stores, etc.
Packaged foods from grocery stores: overstocked items, dented cans, and seasonal items

Food losses begin on the farm. These losses cannot be quantified, but anecdotal evidence suggests that they are significant. Farm losses of food are the result of severe weather conditions, insect, disease, or weed infestations. Mechanical harvesting, which is cost-efficient, can produce losses as the result of harvesting all of a field at once, without concern for quality, maturity, or size. Additional loss at the farm level occurs because marketing standards specify quality and size for produce and not all produce will meet those standards.

The processing and marketing sectors are the next step in the food-loss chain. Losses continue to occur as food is shipped from the farm to the processor, wholesaler, or retail outlet. Estimates indicate that food is handled an average of 33 times before the consumer in the supermarket ever sees it (Kantor, et al., p.5). It is subject to shrinkage, bruising, wilt, bacterial degradation, microbial growth from improper wrapping, temperatures, or handling. Losses at foodservice establishments, like restaurants, snack bars, and institutions, result from over preparation of items, excess food left on customers plates, and unexpected fluctuations in sales that are beyond the control of the foodservice establishment.

Finally, the consumer puts away left-overs from Monday night's meal and by next Monday the previous left-overs are unused, forgotten, and rotten. They end up in the landfill.

Recovering lost food can save money, feed those unable to feed themselves adequately, and reduce landfill use.

Who pays for all these losses? Obviously, we as consumers do—either directly through higher prices or indirectly through taxes and trash collection fees. The next question is “What can be done to reduce these losses and the associated costs?”

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has a website explaining the “Pay-as-You-Throw (PAYT)” program. This program requires residents to pay for each container of waste generated. The result is that people have an incentive to reduce, reuse, and recycle—all to keep their fees for garbage disposal down. The result is that businesses have an incentive to donate usable, edible food to food programs. This

program also helps landfills to last longer and fewer natural resources to be used (<http://www.epa.gov/epaoswer/non-hw/payt/index.htm>). For more information, check EPA's website or call 1-888-EPA-PAYT or 1-888-372-7298.

Poquoson, Virginia, the only community in a nine-county and city region to use PAYT, has the highest recycling rate in the regional program. They recycle an average of 553 pounds per household per year compared to 367 pounds per household for the rest of the region (Bob Kerlinger). (For more information, contact their Recycling Committee at 757-868-3779.)

To deal just with recoverable food losses (EPA's program deals with municipal solid waste of all kinds) USDA has classified four types of programs: field gleaning, perishable food rescue or salvage, food rescue, and nonperishable food collections.

Field gleaning programs provide for farmers' fields to be hand-harvested after they have been mechanically harvested or after harvesting is no longer economically profitable.

Perishable food rescue or salvage programs provide for the collection of perishable foods from wholesalers and grocery store chains.

Food rescue targets restaurants, caterers, foodservices, and the like for collection of usable, prepared foods.

Nonperishable food collections are those of processed foods like dented canned goods, split bags of dried beans or rice, broken boxes of pasta, none of which can be sold, but most of which is still usable. These are typically foods with long shelf lives.

Once the foods are collected from the various sources, they are distributed directly to needy individuals and families or delivered to groups that serve the needy.

How to make a difference

Can one person make a difference in a world of hunger and food loss? Yes, according to a group called “Kids Can Make a Difference,” (<http://www.kids.maine.org/>). Many localities have soup kitchens, gleaning organizations, and such organizations as Second Harvest and food banks where individuals can donate

goods, services, or money. Many Virginia localities are involved with a variety of national and international organizations concerned with food recovery.

USDA has "A Citizen's Guide to Food Recovery" at <http://usda.gov/news/pubs/gleaning> which lists organizations that recover potentially lost food and distribute it. There are web address for many of the organizations described. For those without access to the internet, USDA proves a food recovery hotline: 1-800-GLEANIT or 1-800-453-2648.

Lest potential donors be concerned that they are liable for law suits,

the Bill Emerson Good Samaritan Food Donation Act promotes food recovery by limiting the liability of donors to instances of gross negligence or intentional misconduct. The Act further states that, absent gross negligence or intentional misconduct, persons, gleaners, and nonprofit organizations shall not be subject to civil or criminal liability arising from the nature, age, packaging, or condition of apparently wholesome food or apparently fit grocery products received as donations. (<http://www.usda.gov/news/pubs/gleaning/seven.htm>).

Each state has its own version of the Good Samaritan Law. In Virginia, it is found in the Virginia Code Annotated 3.1-418.1 and 35.1-14.2 (1995). If there are questions about the law, an attorney should be consulted.

Who to contact for more information¹

Blue Ridge Area Food Bank (SH), PO Box 937, Verona, VA 24482, 540-248-3663, Fax: 540-248-6410

Food Donation Connection (FCA), Route 2, Box 224, Newport, VA 24128, 1-800-831-8161, Fax: 540-544-7871

Fredericksburg Area Food Bank (SH), 1327 Alum Springs Road, Fredericksburg, VA 22401, 540-371-7666, Fax: 540-371-3186

Fresh Foods Initiative Foodbank of SE Virginia (SH) (WH) (FC), 2308 Granby Street, Norfolk, VA 23517, 757-624-1333, Fax: 757-627-8588

Lazarus at the Gate, Foodchain affiliate (FCA), 6925 Columbia Pike, #621 Annandale, VA 22003-3466, 703-354-3296

New Life Crisis (SH), P.O. Box 698, Galax, VA 24333, 540-236-0449

Second Harvest of Southwest Virginia (FC), From the Wholesaler to the Hungry (WH), 1111 Shenandoah Avenue, N.W., Roanoke, VA 24001-2868, 540-342-3011, Fax: 540-342-0056

Seed of Life (SH), Rt. 1, Box 72, Bland, VA 24315, 540-688-4808

The Society of St. Andrew, Foodchain (FC), P.O. Box 329, Big Island, VA 24526, 1-800-333-4597, Fax: 804-299-6148

Virginia Cooperative Extension (VCE), Richmond, VA 23219, 804-786-5814, email: jmidkiff@vt.edu.

Virginia's Table, Central Virginia Foodbank, Inc. (SH) (FC), 4444 Sarellen Road, Richmond, VA 23231, 804-226-1899, Fax: 804-226-9034

Virginia's Table Peninsula Food Bank of the Virginia Peninsula (SH) (FC), 9912 Hosier Street, Newport News, VA 23601, 757-596-7188, Fax: 757-595-2507

Second Harvest is a nationwide network of food banks. In 1995, Second Harvest distributed 811.3 million pounds of food. National contact: Christine Vladimiroff 312-263-2303.

From the Wholesaler to the Hungry works with food banks and prepared and perishable food recovery programs to establish and distribute fresh fruit and vegetables to low income people. National contacts: Susan H. Evans and Peter Clarke 213-342-2613.

Foodchain is a national network of perishable and prepared food rescue. Foodchain distributed over 100 million pounds of food to 7,000 agencies in 1995. It matches donors to member programs. National contact: Christina Martin 1-800-845-3008.

¹ The telephone numbers and internet addresses were correct when *Horizons* went to press.

In the United States, more food than would be needed to meet the needs of many of the hungry is wasted. Potential tax deductions for food donations by various sectors of the food chain are lost by not making this wasted, edible food available to organizations that distribute it. Landfills are filled more rapidly because much of the wasted food ends up in them. By contacting an appropriate agency, some of these losses can be eliminated, everyone would be better off, and many people would be better fed.

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U. S. Environmental Protection Agency. *Pay-As-You-Throw*. <http://www.epa.gov/epaoswer/non-hw/payt/index.htm>.

NOTICES

**The REAP faculty and staff would like to thank Andy Kegley for the time and effort he put into the REAP program as an Advisory Council member and as Chairman of the Council. He served REAP for many years before retiring in May.

****How to Reach Us:** REAP, Department of Agricultural and Applied Economics, 0401, Virginia Tech, Blacksburg, VA 24061; telephone: (540)231-9443; fax (540)231-7417; email reap01@vt.edu; or on WWW at <http://www.reap.vt.edu/reap/reap.htm>.

** *To Market . . . To Market . . . Seven Steps to a Marketing Plan for Horticultural Products* outlines the steps to use to develop a marketing plan. The focus is on retail level, but the principles are applicable to wholesale sales as well.

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