

Half of all U.S. food produce is wasted

By Suzanne Goldenberg, The Guardian, adapted by Newsela staff on 07.20.16

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Workers harvest cabbage at a farm on Feb. 4, 2016, near Zellwood, Florida. Ricardo Ramirez Buxeda/Orlando Sentinel/TNS

Americans throw away almost as much food as they eat because of their focus on perfection. The results are deepening hunger and poverty, as well as taking a heavy toll on the environment.

Vast quantities of fresh produce grown in the United States are left in the field to rot, fed to livestock or hauled from the field to a landfill. This waste occurs because of unyielding cosmetic standards, according to data and interviews with farmers and others in food distribution.

“It’s all about blemish-free produce,” says Jay Johnson, who ships fresh fruit and vegetables from North Carolina and central Florida. “What happens in our business today is that it is either perfect, or it gets rejected.”

Produce is lost in fields, warehouses, packaging, distribution, supermarkets, restaurants and refrigerators.

By one government tally, more than 66 million tons of produce worth about \$160 billion is wasted by retailers and consumers every year.

Scarred Vegetables Abandoned In The Field

Those interviewed described additional waste: scarred vegetables abandoned in the field to save the expense of harvest or left to rot in a warehouse because of minor blemishes.

When added to the retail waste, it takes the amount of food lost close to half of all produce grown, experts say.

“I would say at times there is 25 percent of the crop that is just thrown away or fed to cattle,” said Wayde Kirschenman, whose family has been growing vegetables near Bakersfield, California, since the 1930s. “Sometimes it can be worse.”

“Sunburned” or darker-hued cauliflower was plowed over in the field. Entire crates of pre-cut orange wedges were sent to a landfill. In June, Kirschenman wound up feeding a significant share of his watermelon crop to cows.

Researchers acknowledge there is no clear accounting of food loss in the United States.

Imperfect Produce, a delivery service for “ugly” food in the San Francisco Bay Area, estimates that about one-fifth of all fruit and vegetables are thrown out because of imperfections.

However, farmers, including Kirschenman, put the rejection rate far higher.

Globally, about one-third of food is wasted: nearly 1.8 billion tons of produce a year, with a value of about \$1 trillion.

Pledging To Cut Food Waste In Half

The Obama administration and the United Nations have pledged to cut food waste in half by 2030. Food producers, retail chains and groups such as the Natural Resources Defense Council have also vowed to reduce food loss.

Food experts say there is growing awareness that governments cannot fight hunger or climate change without reducing food waste.

“There are a lot of people who are hungry and malnourished, including in the U.S. My guess is probably 5 to 10 percent of the population are still hungry,” said Shenggen Fan, the director general of the International Food Policy Research Institute in Washington, D.C. “That is why food waste, food loss matters.”

That is not counting the waste of water, land and other resources, or the toll on the climate.

In the United States, food is the biggest single item in landfills and incinerators, according to the Environmental Protection Agency. Food dumps are a rising source of methane, a far more powerful greenhouse gas than carbon dioxide.

"Offering 6 Cents A Pound"

The May harvest season in Florida found Johnson with 24,250 pounds of spaghetti squash – perfect except for brown scoring on the rind from a spring storm.

"I've been offering it for 6 cents a pound for a week and nobody has pulled the trigger," he said. "There is a lot of hunger and starvation in the United States, so how come I haven't been able to find a home for this 6-cents-a-pound food yet?"

Retail giants argue that they are operating in consumers' interests, according to food experts. "A lot of the waste is happening ... on behalf of consumers, based on the perception of what those consumers want," said Roni Neff, the director of the food system environmental sustainability and public health program at the Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future in Baltimore.

"Fruit and vegetables are often culled out because they think nobody would buy them," she said.

However, Roger Gordon, who founded the Food Cowboy startup to rescue rejected produce, believes that waste is built into the economics of production. Fresh produce accounts for 15 percent of supermarket profits, he said.

If fresh produce waste is reduced by 50 percent, supermarkets would go from a 1.5 percent profit margin to 0.7 percent, he said. "If we were to lose 50 percent of consumer waste, then we would lose about \$250 billion in economic activity."

Supermarket Giants Rejecting Produce On Flimsy Grounds

Some supermarket chains and industry groups in the U.S. are starting ugly produce sections and campaigning to reduce losses. However, producers and distributors claimed that some retail giants were still rejecting produce in a questionable way.

Farmers and truckers said they have seen their produce rejected on flimsy grounds, but they didn't challenge through the government's dispute process for fear of being boycotted by giant supermarket chains. They asked that their names not be used.

"I can tell you for a fact that I have delivered products to supermarkets that (were) absolutely gorgeous and because their sales were slow, the last two days they didn't take my product and they sent it back to me," said the owner of a trucking company.

"They will dig through 50 cases to find one bad head of lettuce and say: 'I am not taking your lettuce,'" he said, adding that filing a dispute could mean the end of business. "Are you going to jeopardize \$5 million in sales over an \$8,000 load?"

He said he was usually able to sell the produce to another buyer.

Quiz

- 1 Which idea is BEST supported by paragraph 2 of the introduction [paragraphs 1-5]?
- (A) Most consumers are not aware of how much food is wasted at farms.
 - (B) Most consumers are uncomfortable eating produce that has blemishes on it.
 - (C) Food waste happens because consumers expect food to look perfect.
 - (D) Food waste happens because farmers allow produce to rot in the field.

- 2 Read the following selection from the article.

Farmers and truckers said they have seen their produce rejected on flimsy grounds, but they didn't challenge through the government's dispute process for fear of being boycotted by giant supermarket chains.

Which of the following can be inferred from the selection above?

- (A) Farmers should not try to sell supermarkets produce that is less than perfect.
 - (B) The government does not care about the problem of food waste.
 - (C) Farmers need to stand up to supermarkets that reject their produce.
 - (D) Supermarkets have a significant influence on the farming industry.
- 3 Read the sentences from the article.

In the United States, food is the biggest single item in landfills and incinerators, according to the Environmental Protection Agency. Food dumps are a rising source of methane, a far more powerful greenhouse gas than carbon dioxide.

How does the relationship between these two sentences develop a MAIN idea of the article?

- (A) It connects the problem of food waste with its environmental consequences.
- (B) It explains one of the major factors that contributes to food waste in the United States.
- (C) It describes what happens to produce that is not purchased by supermarkets.
- (D) It explains what government agencies are doing to regulate food waste.

- 4 Read the quote from the last section of the article, "Supermarket Giants Rejecting Produce On Flimsy Grounds."

"I can tell you for a fact that I have delivered products to supermarkets that (were) absolutely gorgeous and because their sales were slow, the last two days they didn't take my product and they sent it back to me," said the owner of a trucking company.

What does this paragraph accomplish?

- (A) It shows that supermarkets and farmers have different standards for their produce.
- (B) It explains one of the reasons that supermarkets send good produce back to farmers.
- (C) It proves that supermarkets and farmers must work together to reduce food waste.
- (D) It illustrates that the majority of food waste is caused by supermarket practices.

Answer Key

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