

## THROW AWAY CULTURE: HOW THE FOOD WE DISCARD COMES BACK TO BITE US<sup>1</sup>

Eric Steinman<sup>©</sup>

Everyone wastes food, but for the individual it is a matter of volume and frequency. For every discarded loaf of bread and past date yogurt that may fall into obsolescence at the back of the fridge, there are a dozen eggs absent mindedly left in the trunk of a car, or a few pounds of ground beef fallen a few light shades of grey and turned out to the garbage in quick measure. Virtually every family, and every individual in these plentiful United States discards a fair percentage of their food; whether it has spoiled, or is just too much to consume.

For most people, this is but a mere blip in their path to consumption, but for all the number crunchers out there, this is a huge, overwhelming problem. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food Loss Project, Americans are inclined to discard more than 25% (approximately 25.9 million tons) of all the food produced domestically (some estimates are significantly higher).<sup>2</sup> The tragedy of this substantial waste does not end once the potential for consumption has met its end in the garbage bin. Once all of this decomposing food hits the landfill (whether it is contained in plastic bags or not) it continues breaking down and creating large amounts of methane gas, which is well known for contributing to the long dreaded greenhouse effect. Now comes news (appropriate in light of the recent gulf oil disaster) from the Center for International Energy and Environmental Policy at the University of Texas at Austin, more energy is wasted in the perfectly edible food discarded by people in the US each year than is extracted annually from the oil and gas reserves off the nation's coastlines (this figure does not take into account waste on farms and from fishing).<sup>3</sup> This loss is more than, and effectively nullifies, any contemporary attempt or strategy to improve national energy efficiency.

Haunting stuff to be sure, and just the kind of news that makes one feel utterly hopeless (or sadly motivated to start eating one's own waste). However, while we may never become a zero-waste society, recent inroads in community composting, food recovery, gleaning, and rampant "freeganism" have been, and will hopefully continue to, make an impact on that 25% of waste. If motivated enough to cut our food waste in half we would likely extend the lifespan of landfills by decades and reduce soil depletion and the application of untold tons of fertilizers, pesticides and herbicides, but this requires cleaning our plate in a radically different way.

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<sup>1</sup> Care2, Healthy and Green Daily, August 06, 2010

<sup>2</sup> Take a Bite Out of Food Waste, The Daily Green, Earth Talk, January 31, 2010. (see below)

<sup>3</sup> US food waste worth more than offshore drilling NewScientist, Environment, Magazine issue 2771, July 30, 2010. (see below)

## TAKE A BITE OUT OF FOOD WASTE<sup>4</sup>

### Editors of E/The Environmental Magazine

Food waste is a huge issue in America, especially in light of the growing divide between the profligate rich and the hungry poor. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food Loss Project, we throw away more than 25% -- some 25.9 million tons -- of all the food we produce for domestic sale and consumption. A 2004 University of Arizona study pegs the figure at closer to 50%, finding that Americans squander some \$43 billion annually on wasted food. Lead researcher Timothy Jones reported that on average, U.S. households waste 14% of their food purchases. He estimates that a family of four tosses out \$590 per year in meat, fruits, vegetables and grain products alone. Once this food gets to the landfill, it then generates methane, a greenhouse gas 23 times as potent as carbon dioxide in trapping heat within our atmosphere. According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, landfills account for 34% of all methane emissions in the U.S. -- meaning that the sandwich you made and then didn't eat yesterday is increasing your personal -- and our collective -- carbon footprint.

Furthermore, researchers at the National Institute of Diabetes and Digestive and Kidney Diseases (NIDDK) concluded in a 2009 study that each year a quarter of U.S. water consumption and over 300 million barrels of oil (four percent of U.S. oil consumption) go into producing and distributing food that ultimately ends up in landfills. They add that per-capita food waste has increased by half since 1974, and suggest that the "U.S. obesity epidemic" may be the result of a "push effect" of increased food availability and marketing to Americans unable to match their food intake with the increased supply of cheap food.

In spite of all this, environmentalists are optimistic that Americans can reduce their food waste. For one, restaurants and markets are increasingly finding outlets -- including soup kitchens feeding the poor and farms looking for cheap animal feed -- for food they would otherwise toss. Some communities now pick-up and centrally compost food waste from commercial and residential buildings and put the resulting nutrient-rich soil to use in municipal projects or for sale to the public. And a few enterprising cities now have waste-to-energy technologies that extract methane from landfills for use as fuel.

An extreme reaction to the food waste issue is "freeganism," a movement of people who live on the food cast off by others. These "dumpster divers" share, in the words of movement founder Warren Oakes, "an anti-consumeristic ethic about eating" and not only avoid creating waste but live off that caused by others. Going freegan might be a bit much for most of us, but we can all take action to minimize food waste. The University of Arizona's Jones suggests more careful purchase planning, including devising complete menus and grocery lists, and knowing what foods are lurking in the fridge and pantry that should be used before they go bad.<sup>5</sup> And don't forget that many foods can be frozen and enjoyed later. Jones contends that if we as a nation were able to cut our food waste in half we'd extend the lifespan of landfills by decades and reduce soil depletion and the application of untold tons of fertilizers, pesticides and herbicides.

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<sup>4</sup> The Daily Green, Earth Talk, January 31, 2010

<sup>5</sup> 10 Easy Ways to Reduce Food Waste, The Daily Green, April 2009 (see below)

## TEN EASY WAYS TO REDUCE FOOD WASTE<sup>6</sup>

### TDG Community

Many people think of food waste as a benign substance. It rots down in the landfill anyway, so no problem, right? Wrong! For food to compost properly, it needs light and air. In the landfill, it has neither. Instead, food devoid of light and air produces methane gas, which contributes to global warming. It is estimated that we throw away a *third* of the food we buy each week! Through poor portion control or buying too much fresh food that goes off before we use it we create a lot of waste.

Follow these tips to help you reduce food waste, save money and protect the environment:

- (1) **Write a list!** Menu plan your meals for a week. Check the ingredients in your fridge and cupboards, then write a shopping list for just the extras you need.
- (2) **Stick to the list!** Take your list with you and stick to it when you're in the store. Don't be tempted by offers and don't shop when you're hungry — you'll come back with more than you need.
- (3) **Keep a healthy fridge.** Check that the seals on your fridge are good and check the fridge temperature too. Food needs to be stored between 1 and 5 degrees Celsius for maximum freshness and longevity.
- (4) **Don't throw it away!** Fruit that is just going soft can be made into smoothies or fruit pies. Vegetables that are starting to wilt can be made into soup.
- (5) **Use up your leftovers.** Instead of scraping leftovers into the bin, why not use them for tomorrow's ingredients? A bit of tuna could be added to pasta and made into a pasta bake. A tablespoon of cooked vegetables can be the base for a crock pot meal.
- (6) **Rotate.** When you buy new food from the store, bring all the older items in your cupboards and fridge to the front. Put the new food towards the back and you run less risk of finding something moldy at the back of your food stores!
- (7) **Serve small amounts.** Serve small amounts of food with the understanding that everybody can come back for more once they've cleared their plate. This is especially helpful for children, who rarely estimate how much they can eat at once. Any leftovers can be cooled, stored in the fridge and used another day.
- (8) **Buy what you need.** Buy loose fruits and vegetables instead of prepacked, then you can buy exactly the amount you need. Choose meats and cheese from a deli so that you can buy what you want.

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<sup>6</sup> The Daily Green, April 2009

- (9) **Freeze!** If you only eat a small amount of bread, then freeze it when you get home and take out a few slices a couple of hours before you need them. Likewise, batch cook foods so that you have meals ready for those evenings when you are too tired to cook.
- (10) **Turn it into garden food.** Some food waste is unavoidable, so why not set up a compost bin for fruit and vegetable peelings? In a few months you will end up with rich, valuable compost for your plants. If you have cooked food waste, then a kitchen composter (bokashi bin) will do the trick. Just feed it with your scraps (you can even put fish and meat in it), sprinkle over a layer of special microbes and leave to ferment. The resulting product can be used on houseplants and in the garden.

We've set ourselves a zero waste challenge – could you rise to the challenge too? For further information, visit our site, <http://myzerowaste.com>.

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## US FOOD WASTE WORTH MORE THAN OFFSHORE DRILLING<sup>7</sup>

More energy is wasted in the perfectly edible food discarded by people in the US each year than is extracted annually from the oil and gas reserves off the nation's coastlines. Recent estimates suggest that 16 per cent of the energy consumed in the US is used to produce food. Yet at least 25 per cent of food is wasted each year. Michael Webber and Amanda Cuellar at the Center for International Energy and Environmental Policy at the University of Texas at Austin calculate that this is the equivalent of about 2150 trillion kilojoules lost each year. That's more than could be gained from many popular strategies to improve energy efficiency. It is also more than projections for how much energy the US could produce by making ethanol biofuel from grains. Dairy foods and vegetables are the greatest culprits, with around 466 and 403 trillion kilojoules lost as waste each year, respectively.<sup>8</sup>

The numbers are likely to be conservative, the team says, as they are based on food-waste figures from the US Department of Agriculture from 1995 - the latest available. Since then food prices have dropped and waste is likely to have increased. What's more, the figures do not take into account waste on farms and from fishing. Estimates suggest between 8 and 23 per cent of fish caught worldwide are by-catch, and are often thrown dead or dying back into the sea.

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<sup>7</sup> NewScientist, Environment, Magazine issue 2771, July 30, 2010.

<sup>8</sup> Cuellar, A.D. and M.E. Webber. 2010. Wasted food, wasted energy: the embedded energy in food waste in the United States. Environmental Science and Technology, July 21, 2010. [DOI: 10.1021/es100310d](https://doi.org/10.1021/es100310d). © 2010 American Chemical Society