



# WHAT A WASTE!

– THE FOOD NOBODY EATS



Food waste is all around us. That yellowing broccoli at the back of your fridge, the moldy bread you just threw out, and the school lunches that are dumped uneaten into the trash? They're just a few examples.

In all, up to one-third of the world's food is wasted before it can be eaten, says the **Food and Agriculture Organization** (FAO). That's 1.3 trillion kilograms – triple the body weight of all humans combined. And yet, at the same time, nearly 800 million people worldwide suffer from hunger.

There's something wrong with this picture.

## TRACKING FOOD WASTE

Wasted food is largely a problem of developed countries, where a whopping 39 percent of food is thrown out.

"Food waste is happening in countries where people can afford to throw away food," says Robert van Otterdijk, coordinator of the FAO's Save Food program. The worst food waste offenders are the U.S., Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

How does all that food get wasted? Let's begin in the supermarket, where shoppers are tempted by artfully arranged piles of perfect produce. Any piece that isn't quite the right shape or colour – a zucchini that is too curved, an asparagus tip that isn't tightly budded or a peach with small blemishes or bruising – is rejected. Some of this 'ugly produce' may be donated to food banks or chopped up and used in prepared meals or the salad bar. But most is dumped.

"It's all about quality and appearance, and only the best appearance will capture a share of the consumer's wallet," says one industry insider.

Making matters worse, stores never want to run short, so they order extra produce. Then they have to discard perfectly good food to make room for the next incoming delivery. They could try selling this surplus produce at a discount, but that might undercut sales of the full-priced product.

Turning to restaurants, food is wasted when portions are overly large. Buffets are particularly wasteful. Diners help themselves to excessive portions, then

## FOOD WASTE IN DEVELOPING COUNTRIES

In developing countries, food is not so much wasted as spoiled before it can even get to market. The problem is inadequate storage, lack of refrigeration or poor transportation. In India, for example, an estimated 30 to 40 percent of fruits and vegetables are spoiled before they reach consumers.

To address this problem, aid organizations have started providing small-scale farmers with storage bins and grain sacks, tools for drying and preserving vegetables and fruits, and low-tech equipment for cooling and packing produce. As a result, Afghanistan, for example, has reduced its losses of tomatoes from 50 percent to five percent.

at closing time, employees dump the food that's left over.

Consumers also do their share of wasting food. According to Toronto's Food Policy Council, approximately 47 percent of the food waste in Canada

## DEFINITIONS

**FOOD AND AGRICULTURE ORGANIZATION:** the United Nations agency concerned with the international organization of food and agriculture

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occurs at home. Households throw out an average of \$28 worth of food each week. How? We buy too much, and then let some of this food go bad. Or we throw out items like yogurt unnecessarily because they are past their “best before” dates, which have more to do with peak freshness than spoilage.

**TURNING THINGS AROUND**

The good news? With awareness and an attitude change, we can do much better.

“Once you tell people there’s so much good produce going to waste, people are on board. No one thinks we should be wasting that much food,” says food activist Jordan Figueiredo.

Many organizations are already taking action.

One U.K. environmental group, Feedback, shines a light on the issue of food waste through various campaigns. The organization’s flagship event, Feeding the 5000, involves collecting high-quality produce from farms and packers that has been rejected by supermarkets, then cooking it into elaborate lunches served for free to 5000 diners.

Meanwhile, at the Root Cellar, a green grocer in Victoria, B.C., staff **cull** the produce on display, removing anything that is less than perfect. But this culled food is still used. It goes to the discount table or to feed hungry people in the community. It is collected in bins for local farmers to feed to their chickens and pigs. Less than one percent of the food the store buys is composted.

Toronto’s Second Harvest is also taking steps to tackle food waste. It’s a large ‘food rescue operation’ that collects donated food that would otherwise be thrown away and distributes it to 200 different agencies that feed the needy.

And in the U.S., a growing number of restaurants are starting to measure how much food they dump. One American restaurant, T.G.I. Friday’s, was so dismayed by what it discovered, it now offers smaller portions.

**GOVERNMENTS LEADING THE WAY**

Change is often helped along by new laws or government policies.

In the United Kingdom, great strides were made after the government made food waste reduction a national priority. Then this year, France became the first country to ban supermarkets from throwing away unsold food, forcing them instead to donate it to charities and food banks. And food activists are pressing the European Union to lift a ban on feeding food waste to swine. According to the **United Nations** (UN), feeding wasted food to livestock would save enough cereals to feed three billion people.

**CANADA NEEDS TO STEP UP TO THE PLATE**

The UN and the United States have pledged to halve food waste by 2030. If that target is met, enough food could be saved to feed at least one billion people.

Canadian professor Dr. Sylvain Charlebois specializes in food distribution and policy. He believes Canada, too, needs a national strategy

**A GROWING PROBLEM**

An **overabundance** of food sounds wonderful, at first. Then you realize what it takes to grow this food.

Agriculture uses 70 percent of all freshwater humans consume per year. It is responsible for 80 percent of deforestation in the world’s tropics and subtropics. It also contributes up to 35 percent of human-caused greenhouse gas emissions. 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.

“Production of food is one of the biggest production **sectors** in the world,” says the FAO’s Robert van Otterdijk. “And if one-third of all this is just produced in vain, you can imagine what a huge impact this has on the natural resources – on land, water, energy and greenhouse gas emissions.”

And this impact is expected to grow. With the global population projected to increase by at least two billion inhabitants by 2050, some say we will need to increase global food production by 60 percent over 2005 levels to feed everyone – unless, of course, we stop wasting the food we already have.

and an educational program in schools.

“As consumers we can actually make a significant difference just by changing some of the things we do on a daily basis,” he says.

As one food retailer observed, “Hunger and wasted food are two problems that can have one solution.” ★

**DEFINITIONS**

**CULL:** remove something that has been rejected

**OVERABUNDANCE:** an excessive quantity or amount; more than is needed

**SECTOR:** a part of a country’s economic or business activity

**UNITED NATIONS:** an organization of independent states formed in 1945 to promote international peace and security



## ON THE LINES

Answer the following in complete sentences:

1. Describe how agriculture impacts the environment.

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2. How much food is wasted before it is eaten?

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3. List the four developed countries that waste the most food.

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4. Describe how food is wasted in supermarkets.

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5. Describe how food is wasted in restaurants.

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6. Describe how food is wasted by consumers.

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7. Describe how food is wasted in developing countries.

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8. List at least four ways some organizations and countries are trying to decrease food waste.

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## BETWEEN THE LINES

An **inference** is a conclusion drawn from evidence. A *plausible inference* is supported by evidence in the article and is consistent with known facts outside of the article.

What inference(s) can you draw from the fact that many school children’s lunches are dumped in the trash?

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## BEYOND THE LINES

Spoiled and discarded food is the focus of this article, but many experts argue that the act of feeding farm animals over the course of their lifetimes is also inefficient and harmful to the environment. Research the input-output of this food equation and answer this question for yourselves: should humans be moving towards veganism?

## JUST TALK ABOUT IT

1. a) In what ways is food wasted?
- b) For what reasons is food wastage a problem?
- c) If you were Prime Minister Justin Trudeau, how would you handle the issue of food wastage in Canada? Explain.
3. a) Brainstorm a list of as many ways as you can think of to reduce food waste in your home.
- b) Then, rank your list in order from those measures that would have the least impact on the amount of food wasted in your home to those that would have the most impact.
- c) If your class has a Twitter account, tweet your top three food-saving strategies to **@LesPlanCanada**. We want to hear your ideas!

## ONLINE

*Note:* The links below are listed at [www.lesplan.com/en/links](http://www.lesplan.com/en/links) for easy access.

1. Read a National Geographic article called “How ‘Ugly’ Fruits and Vegetables Can Help Solve World Hunger” at <http://www.nationalgeographic.com/magazine/2016/03/global-food-waste-statistics/>
2. Tour the videos, food waste facts, and campaigns that Feedback has been developing and sharing since 2009 at <http://feedbackglobal.org/>
3. Explore a massive amount of global food-related information at [www.fao.org](http://www.fao.org)
4. Play a food waste game at <http://www.wiseuptowaste.org.uk/waste-less/food-waste/food-waste-game>
5. Learn about “Just Eat It,” an award-winning Canadian documentary about food waste, at <http://www.foodwastemovie.com/>. You could even book a screening, download a curriculum guide or, if you’re near Toronto, catch a showing on September 18th. ★