

Breaking News on Food Processing & Packaging - Europe

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Half of US food goes to waste

25/11/2004- **As the US celebrates Thanksgiving, a new study reveals that almost half the food in the country goes to waste - a statistic that should alarm an industry that is struggling to achieve greater efficiency in order to salvage profits.**

The new study, from the University of Arizona (UA) in Tucson, indicates that a shocking forty to fifty per cent of all food ready for harvest never gets eaten.

Timothy Jones, an anthropologist at the UA Bureau of Applied Research in Anthropology, has spent the last 10 years measuring food loss, including the last eight under a grant from the US department of agriculture (USDA). Jones started examining practices in farms and orchards, before going onto food production, retail, consumption and waste disposal.

What he found was that not only is edible food discarded that could feed people who need it, but the rate of loss, even partially corrected, could save US consumers and manufacturers tens of billions of dollars each year. Jones says these losses also can be framed in terms of environmental degradation and national security.

Jones' research evolved from and builds on earlier work done at the University of Arizona. Archaeologists there began measuring garbage in the 1970s to see what was being thrown away and discovered that people were not fully aware of what they were using and discarding.

Those earlier studies evolved into more sophisticated research using contemporary archaeology and ethnography to understand not only the path food travels from farms and orchards to landfills, but also the culture and psychology behind the process.

The fact that the US is a wasteful nation is not necessarily news, of course. The country has long has been chastised for its wilful consumption of the world's resources, and many aspects of the country's culture encapsulate what environmentalists disparagingly refer to as today's "throw-away society."

Similarly, researchers have known for years about the volumes of food Americans toss into the trash. But only recently, though, has that been quantified as a percentage of what is produced, and the UA statistics are the first tangible proof that US food production is frighteningly wasteful.

A certain amount of waste in the food stream cannot be helped of course. Little can be done, for instance, about weather and crop deterioration. The apple industry, for instance, loses on average about 12 per cent of its crop on the way to market.

Apples in the US are harvested over a two-month period and then stored and sold year-round. People in the apple business use aggressive methods to maintain their crop, with fresh apples hitting the supermarkets on a regular basis and marginal ones sent to be made into applesauce and other products.

The goal of apple growers is to provide a nutritious product, all year long, at fairly constant prices. Jones says they've adopted a conservative business plan that forgoes the boom-and-bust cycles that other fruit and vegetable growers aim for and opts instead for a steady income stream.

But Jones argues that fresh fruit and vegetable growers, in contrast, often behave like riverboat gamblers. They will take a risk on the commodity markets if they think it will help them make a financial killing. A bad bet often means an entire crop is left in the field to be ploughed under.

Jones' research also shows that by measuring how much food is actually being brought into households, a clearer picture of that end of the food stream is beginning to emerge.

On average, households waste 14 per cent of their food purchases. Fifteen per cent of that includes products still within their expiration date but never opened. Jones estimates an average family of four currently tosses out \$590 per year, just in meat, fruits, vegetables and grain products.

Jones says that consumers better need to understand that many kinds of food can be refrigerated or frozen and eaten later. Nationwide, he says, household food waste alone adds up to \$43 billion,

making it a serious economic problem.

Cutting food waste would also go a long way toward reducing serious environmental problems. Jones estimates that reducing food waste by half could reduce adverse environmental impacts by 25 per cent through reduced landfill use, soil depletion and applications of fertilisers, pesticides and herbicides.

Consumers and retailers are also of course responsible for minimising food waste, but it is manufacturers, who are being squeezed by high raw material prices and low retail costs, that stand to gain most by establishing greater operational efficiencies to cut out unnecessary waste.

By demonstrating how wasteful food production in the US currently is, the UA study suggests not only where savings could be made, but also how far many companies are from making them.

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