



EXPLAINER

# Understanding Consumer Food Waste in the U.S. and Strategies to Reduce It

JULY 2025

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## Introduction

In the United States, consumers are the largest generators of food waste. Combining uneaten groceries and restaurant plate waste, consumer food waste accounts for nearly 50% of surplus food at a cost of \$261 billion. The consequences of this waste on our climate and our wallets are enormous. And while organizations and governments can help mitigate this by reshaping consumer environments to make it easier, more convenient, and more affordable to not waste food, much of this waste comes down to problematic—yet very common—consumer behaviors.

By raising awareness of the scale of food waste and its impact among consumers, in addition to providing education on how to manage food more effectively, we have the power to significantly reduce household food waste in ways that can help consumers save money and deal with high food prices, as well as benefit the environment.



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## BY THE NUMBERS

### *What is the Impact of Consumer Food Waste?*

Between uneaten groceries and restaurant plate waste, U.S. consumers waste nearly 35 million tons of food each year. This waste accounts for almost 50% of total surplus food and is equivalent to nearly **58 billion meals** that could have gone to people in need—all while 14% of the population (1 in 7 people) experiences food insecurity. Wasting food hits consumers where it really hurts—their wallets—in the amount of \$261 billion every year, or nearly **\$800 per person**.

All of this uneaten food has an annual greenhouse gas emissions footprint of 154 million metric tons of CO<sub>2</sub>e (the same as driving 36 million passenger vehicles over the course of the year) and consumes nearly nine trillion gallons of water (the same as what could fill more than 13 million Olympic-sized swimming pools).

Raising consumers' awareness about just how much food they waste, as well as the financial and environmental consequences, could significantly reduce household food waste.

#### QUICK FACTS



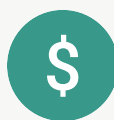
**35 million tons**  
of food wasted each year  
by U.S. consumers



**~50% of total**  
surplus food generated by  
consumers



**154 million metric tons**  
of CO<sub>2</sub>e generated by consumer  
food waste



**\$261 billion**  
spent by consumers on  
wasted food per year



**9 trillion gallons**  
of water used to produce food  
wasted by consumers



**\$800**  
spent by each consumer  
per year on uneaten food

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## Causes of Consumer Food Waste

There are many factors that lead to the high volume of consumer food waste, but predominantly, it comes down to deep-rooted habits that increase the likelihood of food going bad or excess food being thrown away rather than repurposed.

Poor food management, including a lack of knowledge on how to store food properly, overbuying for reasons like trying to take advantage of deals or not having an accurate sense of how much of an ingredient is needed for a recipe, and a lack of experience with repurposing leftover ingredients into new meals all contribute to food going to waste at home. In restaurants, unrealistic portion sizes add to this waste when food that hasn't been finished is thrown away rather than being taken home.

In addition, limited access to municipal food waste recycling programs and a lack of education on—and access to—resources around composting at home obstructs further opportunities to keep food that is typically thrown away (such as the ends of vegetables, fruit cores, and banana peels) from ending up in landfills, where it produces harmful methane emissions as they decompose.

One of the top contributors to food unnecessarily going to waste in the home is confusion around date labels, which frequently leads to meat, fish, dairy, and other perishables being thrown away despite still being safe to eat.

## How GLP-1s May Impact Consumer Food Waste

One in eight U.S. adults have reported taking a GLP-1, a class of medications used to treat type 2 diabetes and obesity. These drugs significantly impact eating habits and have broad implications for the food industry. And their influence is only expected to grow, with estimates projecting anywhere from 15 to 30 million Americans could be taking a GLP-1 medication by 2030.

Potential implications for consumer food waste include:

- Reduced spending on groceries, resulting in less available to waste
- Increased demand for smaller portion sizes, leading to less plate waste
- Shift in food preferences impacting what food gets wasted





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## Confusion Over Food Date Labels

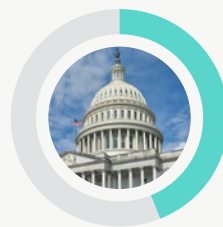
ReFED estimates that nearly 1.5 million tons of food are discarded in homes because of concern over date labels. These are inconsistent—having no standardized system—and confusing, with terms like “best by,” “sell by,” “use by,” and “expires on” all appearing on different products. Motivated by uncertainty around what these labels mean, consumers frequently throw out items that are near or past these dates in the interest of perceived food safety—despite the fact that the dates on most labels focus on food quality rather than safety.

A [2025 survey](#) of U.S. adults conducted for Johns Hopkins University, Harvard Law School Food Law and Policy Clinic, and ReFED found that consumer confusion around food date labels has grown, with 43% of respondents reporting they “always or usually” discard food near or past the date on the label, and 44% mistakenly believing that the federal government regulates labels.

Date labeling is one area where organizations like retailers and government agencies can help to cut food waste by standardizing label messages and educating the public on their meaning.



**43%**  
of U.S. adults “always or usually” discard food near or past the date on the label



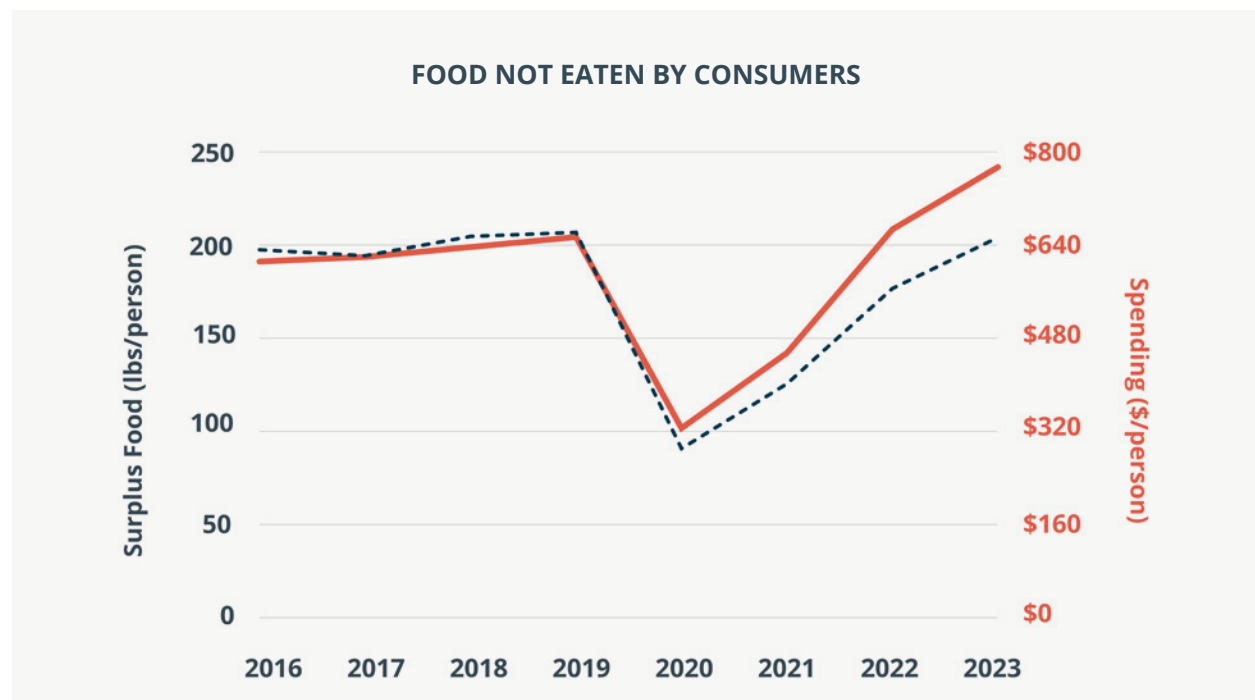
**44%**  
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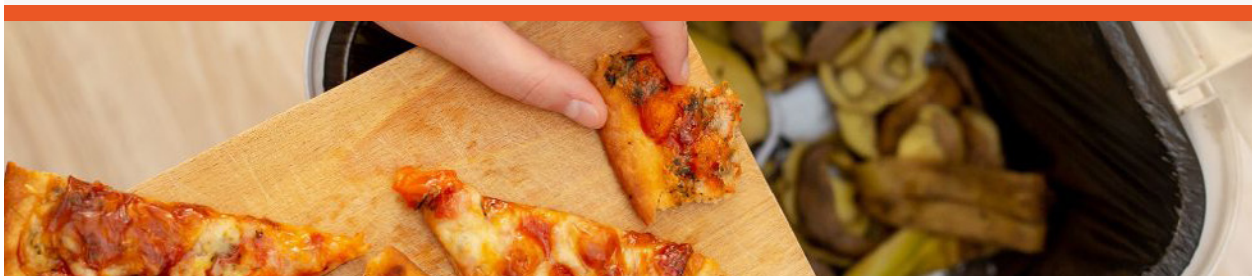
## Why Does Food Waste Continue Even as Prices Rise?

As inflation causes the cost of food to rise, one might assume that increased prices would lead to fewer purchases and a decrease in waste. However, rising food prices have not caused food waste rates to go down. After a brief decline during the COVID-19 pandemic—likely due to more routine cooking of meals at home and a desire to reduce trips to the store—at home food waste increased by 280% from early 2021 to early 2022, and surpassed pre-pandemic levels in 2023.

These figures and other survey data suggest that households are becoming less efficient at utilizing what they buy. Rather than wasting less to manage higher prices, consumers employ strategies like switching from expensive products to cheaper alternatives like private-label items or non-organic produce.



Source: "From Surplus to Solutions: 2025 ReFED U.S. Food Waste Report"



## SOLUTION SPOTLIGHT

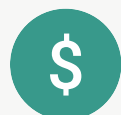
### *Consumer Behavior Change Campaigns*

From making better use of leftovers to learning how to minimize spoilage by properly storing perishable foods, consumers have a direct hand in reducing residential waste.

Despite the attention food waste has received over the last decade, considerable effort is still needed to increase consumer awareness about its impacts, as well as how they can make meaningful changes. Increased awareness may also help inspire consumers to demand that the businesses they frequent, from grocery stores to restaurants, operate more responsibly.

Consumers can start reducing their food waste today by utilizing online tools like [Save The Food](#), which offers practical tips, waste-reducing recipes, and insights into how discarded food affects both their households and the broader food system.

Implementing this solution at scale could yield significant economic and environmental benefits, including:



**\$8.98 billion**

net societal gain



**1.83 million**

tons of food waste diverted



**7.92 million**

metric tons of CO<sub>2</sub>e emissions avoided



**355 trillion**

gallons of water saved



**694**

new jobs created over ten years



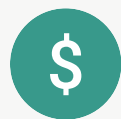
## SOLUTION SPOTLIGHT

### Portion Sizes

Many restaurants and foodservice establishments serve portion sizes that exceed what the average person can finish in one sitting, leading to more plate waste. As this issue has gained attention within the industry, some businesses have started to offer smaller, more reasonable portions—an example includes Panera’s “half” portions of sandwiches and salads. These menu choices help reduce food waste while also encouraging customers to sample more dishes—potentially boosting check averages in the process.

Food establishments can mitigate a negative reaction to these changes and demonstrate transparency by communicating the reasons for plate size change, explaining the positive impacts of smaller portions, and reassuring guests that refill options are available.

The potential benefits of these changes for restaurants and foodservice companies are significant and far-reaching, including:



**\$8.75 billion**  
in net financial gains



**2.35 million**  
tons of food waste diverted



**11.8 million**  
metric tons of CO<sub>2</sub>e emissions reduced



**1.11 trillion**  
gallons of water saved



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## Using the “Food Waste Five”

We all have a role to play in reducing food waste. As consumers, these five easy strategies can help make it convenient and economical to save food in our homes:

- 1 PLANNING AHEAD**  
Plan meals in advance for the week (including factoring in occasions when you’ll get takeout or dine out) to avoid overbuying food. Implement practices like creating “recipe trios” that allow you to repurpose ingredients into new meals throughout the week.
- 2 STORING FOOD PROPERLY**  
Different foods need different storage methods to last longer—such as herbs being placed in a glass of water or bread being wrapped in plastic or foil to retain moisture—which can easily be found online when you’re uncertain of the best approach.
- 3 USING THE FREEZER**  
The freezer acts like a “magic pause button” for food, keeping both cooked and uncooked food fresh for much longer than the fridge. As an added bonus, when you don’t feel like cooking, you can just take something out of the freezer to heat up and eat.
- 4 LEARNING THE LABELS**  
Date labels are confusing and unregulated—for example, many consumers are unaware that “use by” is related to safety, while “best if used by” is related to a product’s peak freshness. So use your best judgment—if a product looks good, smells good, and tastes good, and has a “best by” or “best if used by” label, it’s probably okay to consume.
- 5 EATING DOWN**  
Even when implementing strategies like the “recipe trio,” leftovers are likely. Prevent wasting this food by setting up a regular day to combine leftover portions into meals like stir fries, tacos, soups, or salads.



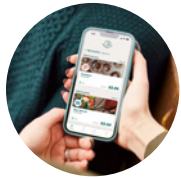
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Additional simple strategies that can help consumers cut down on waste include:



#### **BUY UPCYCLED PRODUCTS**

Prioritize buying products that are made with byproducts of other products, such as crackers made from veggie peels, seltzer drinks made with whey, or pasta made from leftover grain. This is a growing group of products which shoppers can recognize by looking for the official [Upcycled Certified logo](#).



#### **USE MARKDOWN ALERT APPLICATIONS**

Retailers and restaurants are starting to use apps to alert customers of discounts on products at risk of going to waste, which consumers can take advantage of to save money and prevent waste at the retail level.



#### **BUY "UGLY"**

Consumers are often deterred from buying produce that doesn't look perfect because it's misshapen or discolored, even though these factors don't impact taste. Purchasing produce with an unusual appearance—often at discounted prices—can reduce waste and help create demand for fruits and vegetables that would typically be left unharvested.



#### **USE MEAL KITS**

Meal kit services, which provide pre-portioned ingredients, help ensure consumers buy only what they need. Some grocery stores are now offering their own in-house meal kits as well. Both approaches reduce waste by eliminating the need to overbuy ingredients that recipes don't fully use.

## *Conclusion*

Reducing food waste can save consumers hundreds of dollars a year—particularly as food prices remain elevated. And while many drivers of climate change—like fossil fuels and deforestation—can feel out of reach for individuals, food waste is one area where everyday choices truly matter. Reducing food waste offers powerful economic and environmental benefits, and raising awareness about these and other impacts can spark meaningful momentum for change. With small shifts in behavior, better education, smarter shopping and cooking habits, and improved business practices, we can collectively make a big difference.



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## Connect With Us

### ABOUT REFED

ReFED is a U.S.-based nonprofit that catalyzes the food system toward evidence-based action to stop wasting food. We work to increase adoption of food waste solutions across the supply chain by cultivating and convening the food community, delivering actionable evidence and insights, and seeding and accelerating promising initiatives. Our vision is a sustainable, resilient, and inclusive food system that makes the best use of the food we grow.

[refed.org](https://refed.org)

