Reducing food waste in the EU: current challenges and future targets

How much food is wasted in the EU?

Over 58 million tonnes of food were wasted in the EU in 2021, an average of 131 kg per inhabitant with an estimated value of 132 billion euros. Roughly 54 % is generated in households, amounting to 70 kg per capita, while the rest is lost and wasted in the supply chain, including on farms (primary production: 11 kg), manufacturing (28 kg), restaurants and food services (12 kg), retail and other distribution (9 kg).

The best-performing countries in 2021 were Slovenia, Croatia, and Sweden, while the countries with the highest rate of waste per inhabitant were Cyprus, Belgium, and Denmark - exposing a huge disparity among EU countries.

How do we know where the food is wasted?

Since 2020, Eurostat, the EU's statistical office, has measured food waste across all EU Member States. Countries must report food waste in the different sectors according to harmonised rules, yet, concerns about the comparability of the data reported remain, and not all food waste is included in the EU's measurement methodology; Feedback EU estimates that the EU only accounts for 10% of primary production food losses, while losses and waste on farms really amount to a total of 89.8 million tonnes (WWF estimates). When taking into account all waste at the farm level, the EU wastes more food than it imports.

Where is food being wasted?

Food wasted per EU inhabitant in kg

Data: Eurostat 2021
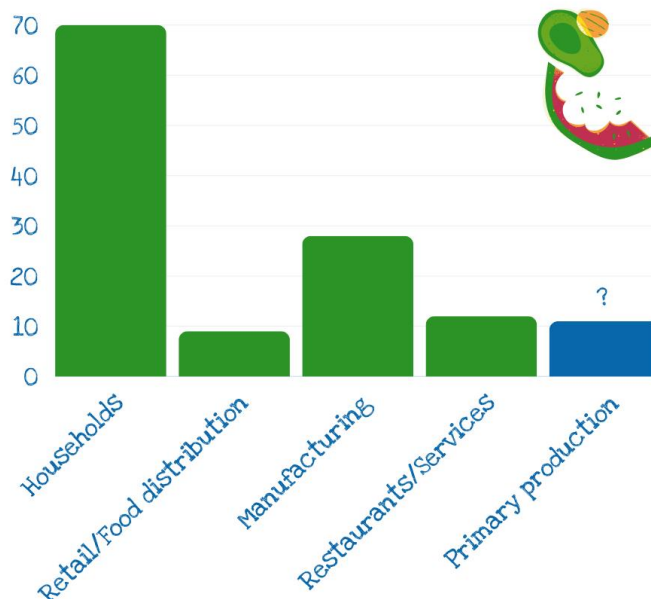
Why should we care?

Preventing food waste has great environmental, social, and economic benefits.

Food waste is responsible for 8-10% of global Green House Gas (GHG) emissions and uses an estimated 28% of the world's agricultural land, an area larger than China and India combined. This land could otherwise enhance food security, nature restoration, and biodiversity. The EU must double its pace in reducing greenhouse gas emissions to meet its

2030 goal of a 55% reduction. Since food waste represents approximately 15 % of the total GHG footprint of the EU food system, it plays a key role in achieving the climate targets.

Moreover, over 37 million people in the EU cannot afford a quality meal every second day, while globally, wasted food could feed 1.26 billion hungry people every year. This makes preventing food waste not only a moral imperative, but also an economic incentive, to save money for farmers, companies, and households. Wasting food costs EU businesses and consumers an estimated €143 billion a year. Preventing food losses and waste is hence a win on multiple fronts: for our climate, biodiversity, food security, business revenues, and household budgets.

What can the EU do?

In 2015, the EU and its Member States signed up to UN Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 12.3 to halve food waste by 2030. In 2024, the Union seems to be far from achieving this goal, and yet, progress is underway as the EU is now bound to introduce the world's first legally binding targets to reduce food waste! However, the proposed law, still under negotiation, falls short of the SDG 12.3 commitment of 50% reduction. Over 65 non-profit and business organisations from 22 EU countries have, therefore, called on policy-makers to introduce legally binding targets to halve food waste by 2030, from farm to fork.

Why is so much food wasted, and what are the solutions?

Several factors contribute to food waste in the supply chain: cosmetic standards preventing crops from being harvested, damage during transport and storage, long supply chains, standardised packaging sizes, and regular store shelves replenishment. Consumers also contribute by misunderstanding date labels, overbuying food, or lacking proper storage and cooking skills.

Addressing those diverse causes requires multi-level interventions; key measures include, for example, greater cross-supply chain cooperation, shortening supply chains, ensuring all food gets harvested, avoiding oversized portions in restaurants, improving date labelling, avoiding standardised packaging, supporting food donations, and raising consumer awareness about better food preservation. Numerous large manufacturers are already leading the way, achieving waste reduction of 30%, 40%, and even 50% by 2030. Governments must stimulate food waste prevention at all levels, and EU-wide legally-binding targets can guide the way and ensure every country is doing its fair share of the challenging task ahead.

MILAN FOOD WASTE HUBS

An outstanding example of local action is Milan's comprehensive food waste policy, which enables collaboration between public agencies, food banks, charities, NGOs, universities, and private businesses. Since 2019, the Food Waste Hubs aim to halve waste by 2030. The food mainly comes from supermarkets and canteens to the three hubs before NGOs distribute it to consumers. Each hub can save around 130 tonnes of food annually, the equivalent of 260,000 meals.