

WASTE LAND

Author Jonathan Bloom wants us to stop wasting food and start giving more to people in need

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It's at the intersection of squandered natural resources, wasted money, worsening climate change and persistent social injustice, and it's sitting in your refrigerator (probably at the back). It's food waste, and the United States has a lot of it.

"To me, it's absolutely ludicrous to have 40 percent of our food supply being wasted while 15 percent of American households are food insecure," author and journalist Jonathan Bloom said. "That juxtaposition of waste and hunger in a country that is so prosperous is really a shame and is morally callous."

But the U.S. is waking up to food waste at the farm, distribution, retail and household levels. Last fall, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the U.S. Department of Agriculture set the nation's first food waste reduction goals, aiming to cut food waste in half by 2030.

And a new bill in Congress, the Food Recovery Act of 2015, includes multiple provisions aimed at reducing waste and diverting more food to food banks. The bill, H.R. 4184, would regulate the "sell-by date" language on products so consumers are less likely to throw out perfectly edible food because it's past date, expand tax breaks for companies donating to food banks, and require contractors providing food to the federal government to donate excess food to hunger-relief organizations.

Introduced by Maine Democratic Rep. Chellie Pingree, the bill is in a House of Representatives committee.

Bloom, author of the Wasted Food blog and of the 2010 book "American Wasteland: How America Throws Away Nearly Half of Its Food (and What We Can Do About It)," recently talked with me about the bill, food waste and how individuals can help prevent it.

Jared Paben: *If enacted into law, how would the Food Recovery Act affect the lives of low-income Americans?*

Jonathan Bloom: If all of its provisions pass — and that's not especially likely — the bill would increase the amount of fresh food available for food banks mostly by extending the tax benefits for donating food from restaurants and retailers. Additionally, there would be several other opportunities to promote donation of healthy foods, partly through establishing an Office of Food Recovery but also through encouraging donation from farms and even schools for donating excess food.

J.P.: *Does the bill go far enough to address*

the issue, in your opinion?

J.B.: Yes and no. In a perfect world, there are a few other things I'd love to see included in the bill, but being pragmatic about the matter, the bill, as it's presently constructed, isn't likely to pass. You can't have everything. Even the people in Pingree's office I've spoken to recognize

that all of the provisions will not become law and, rather, it's a starting point for a conversation in this murky business of representative democracy.

J.P.: *What do you think are the most impactful provisions of it? I know the part where they talk about regulating the "best by" dates has gotten a lot of press.*

J.B.: I love the idea of amending how we handle date labels in America. And something as simple as putting "manufacturer's suggestion only" next to the date would go a long way toward minimizing household food waste. I'd love to see that kind of uniformity. But at the same time, stepping away from legislation, I think that we, as individuals, have to take some responsibility for the household's food waste that's caused by date labels just by being a bit more savvy about what those dates actually represent. Put simply, date labels aren't about food safety. It's about the quality of that food.

J.P.: *You read my mind. I was actually going to ask about what some of the steps are that we, as individuals, can do to reduce food waste. Is that a big one? Just keeping in mind that those "best by" dates don't reflect when it's safe to eat food?*

J.B.: Yes, that's a big one, but not the most significant. If individuals are looking to make a significant impact on their household food waste, the best way to do that is simply by buying less food. We don't use about a quarter of the food we bring home. So keeping that in mind the next time you go shopping will lead to a dramatic improvement, by essentially ensuring that we don't "buy waste." When we overpurchase, we're almost guaranteeing that we'll have too much, and we often put ourselves in that position just by filling our refrigerator with all these fresh, perishable foods that we couldn't possibly eat before they go bad.

J.P.: *Taking your advice is better for the pocketbook, too.*

J.B.: Sure, yeah. The average family of four is throwing away \$2,000 in food that they discard.

There's significant savings to be had. Just getting back to the buying-less thing. Logistically, what that often looks like is simply shopping more often and buying less each trip. But if you live far from the store, where it doesn't make sense to do that, or if you simply prefer a

larger shopping run, then it's important to plan out meals. Make a detailed shopping list and then actually stick to that list when you're in the store, which is easier said than done. I have a couple other bullet point tips. Saving and then actually eating leftovers is a big one. But the key there is that you have to do the latter. It doesn't do any good to put leftovers in the fridge and throw them out a week later. Using your freezer as a waste avoider but not simply a waste delayer. Not serving excessive portions to family and friends but rather serving a reasonable amount and then making it easy for people to take seconds. And just paying attention to date labels and not treating date labels as the ultimate arbiter of when food will go bad but trusting your senses of smell and taste and sight.

J.P.: *Does America waste more food than other countries?*

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