

# Hunger: 133 billion pounds of food are wasted each year

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## Billions wasted

Every year, 133 billion pounds of food at the consumer and retail level is never consumed, a \$161.6 billion write-off at retail prices, according to a 2014 USDA study. The Natural Resources Defense Council estimates that 40 percent of the food grown in the U.S. — enough to fill the Rose Bowl every day — is never eaten. The waste includes 20 percent of the nation's milk production and 52 percent of the fruit and vegetables grown, according to the NRDC.

In this abundance of plenty, however, many do without. In 2013, some 49.1 million Americans lived in "food-insecure" households, where a good meal is inaccessible at least part of the time, according to the USDA's Economic Research Service. About 33 percent of all emergency food recipients are children. Recovering just 30 percent of wasted U.S. food could feed all those Americans, according to the NRDC.

John Burt, executive director of the nonprofit Farmers Ending Hunger in Salem, said that after a family finishes paying for rent, transportation and utilities, food is often the only expense that can be cut.

"That last thing you don't have to spend money on, incredibly, is food," he said. "Nobody's going to make you."

From tractor to table, inefficiencies exist all along the supply chain. Grocery stores, restaurants and food service institutions are responsible for 50 percent of the food wasted in the U.S., said JoAnne Berkenkamp, a senior advocate with NRDC's Food & Agriculture Program.

In a presentation to a National Press Foundation fellowship group in July, Berkenkamp said grocery store waste is the result of "hyper-stocked" shelves, too much variety, poor handling, overly strict pull dates and too much emphasis on cosmetic appearance.

Restaurants provide portions that are too large, and the "kitchen culture," with its emphasis on speed and appearance, pays little attention to waste, she said.

Berkenkamp said producers account for 7 percent of waste and processors just 1 percent. "That segment of the food system is quite efficient," she said.

Consumers, on the other hand, are responsible for 42 percent of the waste, Berkenkamp said. We buy too much and cook too much, she said. "Then we have leftovers, and we don't like leftovers."

Consumers also are hyper-aware of date labeling on food products, often mistaking them for safety warnings rather than freshness advisories. Many people throw food away rather than examine it themselves and give it a sniff test, she said.

## Cutting waste

Reducing waste is a complicated matter. Experts say consumers' picky preferences, where every fruit or vegetable must be "just so," ensure selective harvests that overlook some edible but aesthetically unpleasing food.

Produce with minor bumps and blemishes is sometimes left unharvested. Food can even be disqualified for being too big, which was the case at a recent Salem Harvest event.

"All these cucumbers were left in the field because they were too long or too fat or had a little yellow on them," Bauman said. "The grocery store says the consumers are driving it, and the consumer says the grocery store isn't giving them the option. It's just blame, blame, blame and nothing gets done."

At the farm level, producers sometimes plow under unpicked food, renewing the soil with nutrients, but the unnecessary crop has a cost in energy, labor and water.

Experts say some farmers are squeezed by rigid con-



Salem Harvest Executive Director Elise Bauman, left, helps her daughter Abigail, 6, pick blueberries at the Beilke Family Farm in August.

Zane Sparring/Capital Press

tracts with processors that reward overproduction and ignore variable yields.

Farmers use 10 percent of the nation's energy, 50 percent of the land and 80 percent of the available fresh water. According to an NRDC research paper, about 25 percent of that water is wasted on food that never makes it to the plate.

"(Farmers) are victims of certain situations, whether it's the pickiness of the market or the price of the good not justifying harvest," said Jonathan Bloom, an author, journalist and frequent speaker on food waste. "Orders get canceled at the last minute, and (farmers) eat that produce."

Picking crews, transportation and storage are expensive. Most farmers would rather swallow the cost of an unharvested crop than spend more harvesting what the market will not pay for, Bloom says. This practice, typically called a "walk-by," is common for contracted acres as well.

Farmers often agree to produce a set volume of crop for processors, and these contracts can stipulate fines or other harsh penalties for farmers who fail to fulfill them. Farmers who work primarily with one or two large buyers face additional pressure to please the market.

But because nature is inherently unpredictable, and drought, pests or labor shortages can shrink yields, some farmers plant more than they can reasonably hope to sell.

"I feel for them," said Dana Gunders, a NRDC scientist and author of the white paper. "Having a system where customers buy X number of fancy grade apples, rather than a share of the overall crop ... leads to waste."

But the problem is also cultural, according to Gunders.

"Littering is totally unacceptable in our society. If you throw an empty potato chip bag on the street, people look at you like you're crazy," she said. "But if you throw a full bag of potatoes in the trash, no one thinks a thing of it."

## MORE INFO

**Farmers Ending Hunger**  
Executive Director John Burt  
503-931-9232  
John@farmersendinghunger.com  
Post Office Box 7361  
Salem, OR 97303  
Farmersendinghunger.com

**Marion Polk Food Share**  
President Rick Gaupo  
503-581-3855  
mpfs@marionpolkfoodshare.org  
1660 Industrial Drive NE  
Salem, OR 97301  
marionpolkfoodshare.org

To see a YouTube video interview with food waste expert JoAnne Berkenkamp of the Natural Resources Defense Council, go to: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sqPVLimfgr8#t=43>

## Donations feed needy

Long imagined as the collectors of dusty tin cans scrounged from the back of the pantry, food banks have evolved in the last two decades, putting a new emphasis on fresh fruits and vegetables. As their relationship with processors has changed, farmers themselves have become even more crucial to the fight to end hunger.

Farmers Ending Hunger, which encourages farmers to "donate an acre" of crops, last year helped growers give more than 2.5 million pounds of wheat, onions, carrots, potatoes, beef, sweet corn and green beans to hungry families across Oregon.

It doesn't hurt that farmers in Oregon can apply for a tax credit worth 15 percent of the donated food's value. Similar credits exist in Colorado, California and Arizona.

Burt, the executive director, said he works with food processor NORPAC to find free time on its processing line. A mining company will often donate the raw metal for the cans at a reduced price as well.

"The sad fact of life is that the can costs more than the beans that come in it," he said.

To divert excess crops to feed the needy, gleaner groups have sprouted around the West. In California, the Farm to Family gleaners recover more than 120 million pounds of food a year. Its "concurrent picking" system directs

farm workers to harvest healthful but unmarketable produce alongside the higher-grade product. The California Association of Food Banks pays for the additional labor, packing and transportation costs.

"Hunger is a problem of distribution, not supply," Bloom, the author, said. "We have more than enough food in this country to feed everyone. It's really a question of finding the social and political will to eliminate hunger."

## Gleaners help

At the blueberry farm, Bauman stops to chat with Carole Boliou, a Marion County coordinator for the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children, popularly known by the initials WIC.

Boliou says Salem Harvest can help overcome the "shame factor" some clients feel when asking for aid.

"You have people out here who may not qualify for any benefits working alongside people who may not have any income coming in at all. And there's no stigma," she said. "They're working together to give back to the community."

That's Salem Harvest's goal, too. The nonprofit yielded 294,000 pounds of fresh fruit and vegetables to the Marion-Polk network of food banks last year.

The 41 gleaners present were there because the farmers, who employ an automated over-the-row harvester on most of the blueberry crop, cannot use the machine on the rows planted between the poles that support bird-proof netting.

"It's sad. From farm to table — the amount of food that gets wasted — it's an astoundingly high number. It doesn't even leave the farm before getting tossed," Bauman said. "So often we'll go out there with as much manpower as we can muster, and not touch even half or a quarter of what's out there."

Staff writer Eric Mortenson contributed to this story. He reported from St. Louis, Mo., and Portland.

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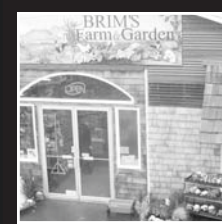
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HOLLY LARKINS at  
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**Q:** What happens at a Columbia Forum gathering?

**A:** We gather for conversation and delicious appetizers at 6pm. By 6:30, the dinner is ready. At 7:15 the speaker is introduced, and we often finish by 8pm. But if the speaker and audience are especially engaged, we might go until 9pm.

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