



## Cheap food is not cheap to produce, and easy to throw away

Published: Friday, July 09, 2010, 6:10 AM Updated: Friday, July 09, 2010, 1:06 PM



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Blanchet House is able to serve over 800 meals a day to homeless and hungry Portlanders with salvaged -- but safe and still edible -- food delivered by Urban Gleaners. It's one small way to halt the growing food-waste stream.

"Bananas everywhere," John Campaine says as he steers his white van to the back door of a Northwest Portland restaurant. "There's way too much bread and too many bananas in this world."

Every morning before most people roll out of bed, Campaine picks up what he calls "heinous quantities" of still-edible but imperfect food for **Urban Gleaners**, a nonprofit that each month gathers some 40,000 pounds of discarded food from the city's restaurants, grocery stores, cafeterias and caterers and delivers it to the hungry.

It's only a trickle in the swelling river of

U.S. food waste.

A new study from the National Institutes of Health says that a whopping 40 percent of what farmers grow ends up in the garbage. That number has increased, too: in 1974, just 30 percent ended up as food waste.

This stinking overabundance, says the study, damages our planet and our health.

The food we toss consumes 4 percent of all U.S. oil and more than 25 percent of our fresh water. Food rotting in landfills produces methane, a potent climate-changing gas. Not to mention the energy spent first delivering, then hauling away uneaten food.

And the marketing of excess food helps drive the obesity epidemic. The increase in waste parallels a 26

percent increase in food available to each American between 1974 and 2003, the years of the study. That translates to 800 extra calories of food available per person per day, even as our population has grown.

Farmers coax their fields with the enthusiastic use of fertilizers, pesticides and herbicides. But while rivers and streams fill with farm runoff, hunger accelerates everywhere, including in Oregon, the second-hungriest state in the union.

The NIH study raises questions about our food production and distribution systems. Do we produce too much food? The wrong kind of food? Or do we deliver it to the wrong places?

Or is it all three?

### **The push hypothesis**

The NIH scientists set out to examine the roles inactivity and overeating play in obesity. In particular, they wanted to determine if overeating alone could account for an average American adult's weight gain of 20 pounds between 1974 and 2003. Assuming unchanging activity, they calculated how much a person would have to eat to put on that weight.

"We were wondering if there was enough food in the food supply to account for that," says Kevin D. Hall, the leader of the NIH team, "and there was more than enough. In fact, it was much higher and it was going up at a faster rate."

Daily food available increased from around 3,100 calories in 1974 to around 3,900 calories in 2003. Only 300 of these daily calories account for the average weight gain.

That left 500 calories, which led NIH scientists to their "push" hypothesis: excess food pushes its way onto plates, the little bit more that people eat makes them overweight, and the rest goes in the trash or gets wasted along the way.

The **U.S. Dept. of Agriculture** measures food waste differently than the NIH group. Applying "loss factors" to food availability data, they reduce the amount of food available based on its type and the way it is produced, distributed and processed. Loss factors were last estimated in 1974, so the USDA figures remain at 30 percent.

The conclusions of the NIH study, and the push hypothesis, are supported by a recent paper by researchers affiliated with the **World Health Organization**. That study predicted the average weight if all the food claimed unwasted by the USDA was eaten. It found the average American would be 5 pounds heavier than he already is.

This year, the USDA is finishing three initiatives to measure food loss -- at the farm, retail and consumer levels. The USDA's more detailed data relies on interviews and self-reports, but reporting on food use changes behavior, so accurate estimation is difficult.

Such difficulties have made food waste understudied. Until the USDA reports are published, the study by Hall's team contains the most up-to-date information on food waste at the national level.

### **Too many bananas**

The research that does exist -- with data from the late '90s or earlier -- suggests about 60 percent of food waste is due to consumers, coming from restaurants and households. When it comes to meat, Americans clean their plates. In restaurants, grains and other starchy side dishes get left behind. At home, individuals throw out large quantities of single food items -- again uneaten carbohydrates, along with imperfect or spoiled dairy products and vegetables.

In part, consumer waste reflects a mix of media messages. Weight-conscious eaters feel empowered by leaving something on their plates. Shoppers buy more than they need, ignoring what's already in their pantries. Simultaneously told to eat healthy and bombarded with unhealthy products, Americans fill up on meat and processed foods while their fruits and vegetables spoil.

Ever-cheaper food is also easier to throw away. Consumers can afford to be picky, insisting on perfect-looking produce and throwing out food they fear may be old or bad. Which partly explains the bananas.

"We got all these cases of bananas from Zupan's that had mistakenly been put in the refrigerator," says Urban Gleaners founder Tracy Oseran. "If you put bananas in the refrigerator they turn black. But they were perfectly fine. There are those kinds of things over and over again."

Of course, the hungry don't have the luxury to throw out black bananas or let vegetables rot, says Jacque Grieve, director of St. Vincent de Paul's Food Recovery Network. St. Vincent de Paul serves food to 100 teens every Friday in Molalla. The one thing they ask for? "Green salad," says Grieve. The organization gets about 6 to 12 pounds of it a week. "It's never enough," she says.

According to Oseran, the uneven distribution of food needs to be solved. "From where I stand, it's hard for me to imagine that people could go hungry in this country," she says. "If we could just redistribute it, there would be plenty for everybody to eat."

And composting -- at home or by the city such as the curbside composting that Portland is testing -- may help reduce some environmental impact instead of it being buried in landfills.

Ultimately, though, stemming the tide of food waste may require rethinking the production model. "Unless we address something at the source, why we're producing so many calories and pushing them through the

supply chain, then we're just gonna increase the food waste," says Hall. He believes this will involve changes to Depression-era federal policies aimed at feeding a booming population.

"Agricultural subsidy programs have changed farm policy so that it basically rewards overproduction," he says. "We've kind of overshot."

The food industry will also have to change. "They're out there to produce profits, and the way to make profits is by producing a lot of cheap food and getting people to buy it as much as possible," says Jeffery Sobel, a scientist at Cornell University's Division of Nutritional Sciences. Left to its own devices, the industry makes too many items no one needs to eat -- cheap, high-calorie foods like the thousands of new food products introduced each year, and like the pastries, bread and the plentiful bananas that John Campaine collects.

As he will tell you, the "push" is being felt by Portland's neediest.

"We joke that Portland has the fattest homeless people in the country," Campaine says, working his way through a breakfast of biscuits and eggs at Blanchet House in Northwest Portland, a nonprofit that houses and feeds the homeless and one of the many organizations that receives food from Urban Gleaners. "When guys first come to the House, they have to be careful. A lot of them end up putting on weight."

-- **Ben Pittman-Polletta**

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