

A Sustainable Environment: Our Obligation to Protect God's Gift

by

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We Must Stop Wasting Food

The world population is growing at a very rapid rate and may soon be out of control. While humans have been on this earth for thousands of years, just in my lifetime the world population has increased from 2.2 billion to over 7 billion people. In other words, the population has increased 3.5 times in such a short period of time, and we are adding about 10 million people every six weeks. And feeding these people will become more and more critical.

I have indicated on several occasions that the quantity and quality of water may be our most critical environmental issue. Of all the water on the earth, only 0.1% is available fresh water and 60% of that is consumed for agricultural purposes. Unfortunately, not all of the agricultural growth is for food. About 40% of the corn in the U.S. goes to producing ethanol – a real waste of such a valuable commodity. But that is not the only waste we are incurring and must be corrected.

A recent report by the National Resources Defense Council (NRDC) indicates that Americans are wasting about 40% of the food from the farm to the table to the landfill. Even the most sustainably farmed food does us no good if the food is never eaten. Getting food to our tables eats up 10% of the total U.S. energy budget, uses 50% of U.S. land, and swallows over 60% of the freshwater consumed in the United States. Yet, 40% of the food in the United States today goes uneaten. That amounts to over 20 pounds per person per month and adds up to \$165 billion per year, not to mention the quantity of valuable freshwater that is wasted. Moreover, almost all of that uneaten food ends up rotting in landfills where it accounts for almost 25% of U.S. methane emissions, and methane is 23 times more potent than carbon dioxide in contributing to global warming. Wow, that is a real mouthful!

Today, Americans are wasting 10 times as much food as people in Southeast Asia, and it is 50% more than we did in the 1970s. There is no reason why we can't get back to that trend. If we can reduce waste by just 15%, it would provide enough food to feed 25 million Americans. What are some of the things that can be done?

- Starting with the supply chain, the food processors must find alternative uses for produce that doesn't meet retail standards. For example, carrots that are too "bent" can be converted to "baby carrots". By increasing the efficiency of our food system, we can make better use of our natural resources.

- A government agency should standardize and clarify the meaning of date labels on food so that consumers will stop throwing out items due to misinterpretation. A waste reduction organization in the United Kingdom has estimated this type of clarification could prevent about 20 percent of wasted food in households.
- Educational programs should be implemented to develop more composting systems and reduce the amount of waste to landfills.
- Care should be taken in purchasing food in large quantities as too often it is not consumed within the time prescribed. If care isn't taken, this could be a problem when shopping at a store like Costco that encourages large quantities. Or better care should be taken in storing and cooking food.
- And for health reasons, Americans should eat less food and that food should be more freshly prepared and not the processed food that is more convenient for the household. Processed food contains less nutrients that are replaced by undesirable chemicals with the net result contributing to obesity.

Increasing the efficiency of the U.S. food system is a triple bottom-line solution that requires a collective approach by decision-makers at every level in the supply chain. Investing in these food waste reduction strategies, together we can reap the tremendous *social* benefits of alleviating hunger, the *environmental* benefits of efficient resource use, and the *financial* benefits of significant cost savings.