

# U.S. Food Waste Contributes to Climate Change

Nearly **40 percent** of all the food produced in the United States goes to waste—enough calories to feed every hungry person in the country more than *four times* over, according to U.S. government data.<sup>i</sup> The U.S. is one of the largest producers of food waste—an average of 550 pounds per person in 2021.<sup>ii</sup>

Reducing U.S. food waste is part of Bread for the World's farm bill platform because it will contribute to ending U.S. and global hunger. Food waste in low-income countries comes mainly from producers' lack of safe storage, refrigeration, and/or transportation to get their harvest to market. A vast amount of healthy food spoils in the fields because farmers don't have many options to sell their produce. This happened in the U.S. in the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic, when food supply chains broke down and farmers around the country resorted to plowing under their fields and pouring out milk.

Much of U.S. food waste is on the consumer side, however. Food waste is less often discussed as a driver of climate change than other sources, such as carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) emissions from cars and coal-fired power plants, but there is increasing recognition of its importance. In fact, climate scientists identify reducing food waste as one of the most effective ways of slowing climate change.<sup>iii</sup>

Most food waste ends up in landfills, and as it breaks down it emits methane, a greenhouse gas that is up to 28 times as potent as CO<sub>2</sub>. Food waste is among the top sources of methane emissions. Also, significant progress can be made quickly on reducing food waste.

Apart from its impact on climate change, food waste is an enormous loss of nutrients as well. The largest share of U.S. food waste is fresh produce—foods with essential nutrients but higher prices. Low-income households in particular struggle to afford the most nutritious foods.

## Cutting food waste in the United States is achievable.

In 2015, the U.S. government [set a goal to cut food waste in half](#) by 2030. Progress has been slow and leadership mostly disappointing. Nonprofits and the private sector are shouldering too much of the responsibility. The farm bill reauthorization that Bread has been working on, scheduled for 2023 but at this writing in December 2023 not yet passed, is a prime opportunity to increase support for efforts to avoid wasting food.

<sup>i</sup> <https://www.epa.gov/newsreleases/epas-food-recovery-challenge-awardees-showcase-ways-tackle-largest-category-waste#:~:text=At%20the%20same%20time%2C%20uneaten,million%20estimated%20food%20insecure%20Americans.>  
<sup>ii</sup> [https://refed.org/articles/refed-s-new-estimates-on-food-waste-in-the-united-states-](https://refed.org/articles/refed-s-new-estimates-on-food-waste-in-the-united-states-2020-2021-trends-and-covid-19-impact/#:~:text=%22In%202021%2C%20the%20United%20States.all%20surplus%20food%20in%202021.)

[2020-2021-trends-and-covid-19-impact/#:~:text=%22In%202021%2C%20the%20United%20States.all%20surplus%20food%20in%202021.](https://www.wastedive.com/news/project-drawdown-climate-change-zero-waste-number-one/573660/)  
<sup>iii</sup> <https://www.wastedive.com/news/project-drawdown-climate-change-zero-waste-number-one/573660/>



There is a new farm bill every five years. The 2023-2024 farm bill will build on the 2018 farm bill, which was the first to dedicate resources to reducing food waste. It established the position of Food Loss and Waste Reduction Liaison to coordinate the work of the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA). What is needed now is an office with enough staff to coordinate government agencies and support the efforts of state and local governments, Tribal governments, nonprofits, and the private sector.

One reason for household food waste is confusion over date labels that do not simply state when food is no longer safe to eat. "Best by," "use by," and other labelling terms do not have standard definitions, so what the labels mean can vary tremendously from company to company and from product to product. Consumers are understandably confused. Changing federal policies and regulations to clarify and standardize date labels could make a big difference in reducing the amount of food that ends up in landfills. This will benefit everyone, especially families who participate in the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and can least afford to throw away food that is still safe to eat.

The farm bill can adopt better policies to support post-harvest recovery. Food recovery prevents waste and feeds people. Increased investment in infrastructure that improves food recovery would benefit food banks and make it more affordable for groups of gleaners to distribute the food they recover.

Gleaning, or gathering what is left over after crops are harvested by machine, can be expanded by providing better support for both gleaners and farmers. The farm bill reauthorization offers an opportunity to do both. Farmers can't market everything they grow. "Leftovers" may be products with unpredictable finicky markets and fruits and vegetables that may have blemishes or not fit retailers' size and shape expectations. Food banks and others that provide food for anyone who wants it will usually accept what retailers reject, so there is a "market" for the foods that gleaners offer.

Nationally, we spend hundreds of billions of dollars growing, processing, marketing, and then disposing of food that is never eaten. With [44 million people](#) living in households that were food insecure at some point during 2022, we cannot afford not to reap more of what we sow. 🍷

