

As US hunger rises, Trump administration's 'efficiency' goals cause massive food waste

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A person sits in a field of crops after a raid by U.S. immigration agents.

Blake Fagan/AFP via Getty Images

The U.S. government has caused massive food waste during President Donald Trump's second term. Policies such as immigration raids, tariff changes and temporary and permanent cuts to food assistance programs have left farmers short of workers and money, food rotting in fields and warehouses, and millions of Americans hungry. And that doesn't even include the administration's actual destruction of edible food.

The U.S. government estimates that more than 47 million people in America don't have enough food to eat – even with federal and state governments spending hundreds of billions of dollars a year on programs to help them.

Yet, huge amounts of food – on average in the U.S., as much as 40% of it – rots before being eaten. That amount is equivalent to 120 billion meals a year: more than twice as many meals as would be needed to feed those 47 million hungry Americans three times a day for an entire year.

This colossal waste has enormous economic costs and renders useless all the water and resources used to grow the food. In addition, as it rots, the wasted food emits in the U.S. alone over 4 million metric tons of methane – a heat-trapping greenhouse gas.

As a scholar of wasted food, I have watched this problem worsen since Trump began his second term in January 2025. Despite this administration’s claim of streamlining the government to make its operations more efficient, a range of recent federal policies have, in fact, exacerbated food wastage.



A farmworker raises her hands as armed immigration agents approach during a raid on a California farm in July 2025.

Blake Fagan/AFP via Getty Images

Immigration policy

Supplying fresh foods, such as fruits, vegetables and dairy, requires skilled workers on tight timelines to ensure ripeness, freshness and high quality.

The Trump administration’s widespread efforts to arrest and deport immigrants have sent Immigration and Customs Enforcement, the Border Patrol and other agencies into hundreds of agricultural fields, meat processing plants and food production and distribution sites. Supported by billions of taxpayer dollars, they have arrested thousands of food workers and farmworkers – with lethal consequences at times.

Dozens of raids have not only violated immigrants' human rights and torn families apart: They have jeopardized the national food supply. Farmworkers already work physically hard jobs for low wages. In legitimate fear for their lives and liberty, reports indicate that in some places 70% of people harvesting, processing and distributing food stopped showing up to work by mid-2025.

News reports have identified many instances where crops have been left to rot in abandoned fields. Even the U.S. Department of Labor declared in October 2025 that aggressive farm raids drive farmworkers into hiding, leave substantial amounts of food unharvested and thus pose a "risk of supply shock-induced food shortages."



Food specially formulated to feed starving children is marked for disposal in a U.S. government warehouse in July 2025.

Stephen B. Morton for The Washington Post via Getty Images

Foreign aid cuts

When the Trump administration all but shut down the U.S. Agency for International Development in early 2025, the agency had 500 tons of ready-to-eat, high-energy biscuits worth US\$800,000, stored to distribute to starving people around the world who had been displaced by violence or natural disasters. With no staff to distribute the biscuits, they expired while sitting in a warehouse in Dubai.

Incinerating the out-of-date biscuits reportedly cost an additional \$125,000.

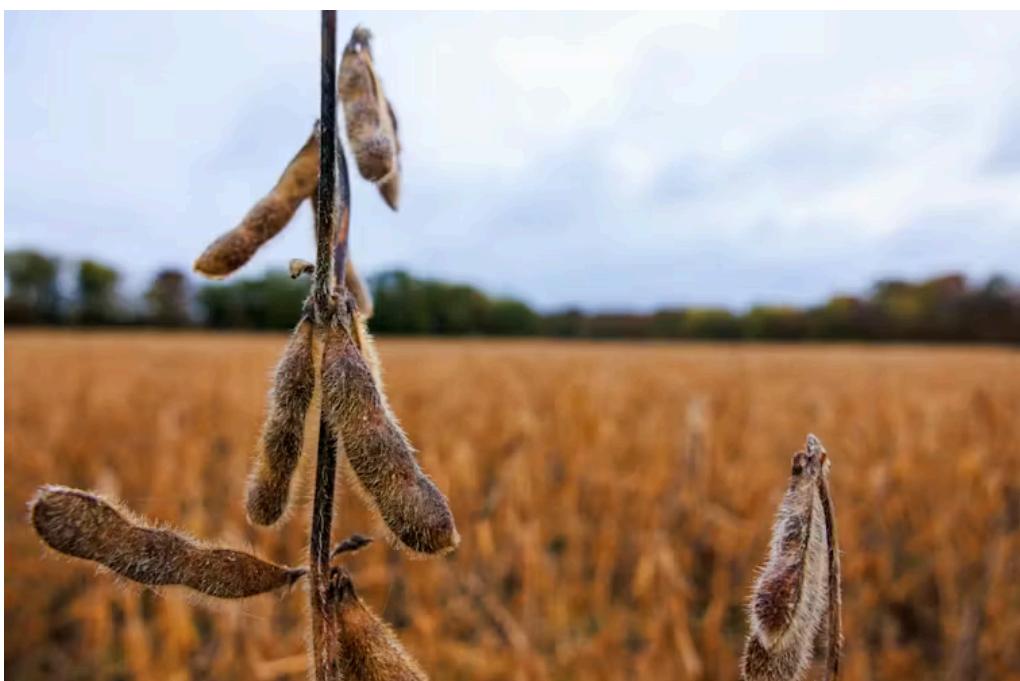
An additional 70,000 tons of USAID food aid may also have been destroyed.

Tariffs

In the late 20th century, as globalized trade patterns grew, U.S. farmers struggled with agricultural prices below their production costs. Yet tariffs in the first Trump administration did not protect small farms.

And the tariffs imposed in early 2025, after Trump regained the White House, severed U.S. soybean trade with China for months. Meanwhile, there's nowhere to store the mountains of soybeans. An October 2025 agreement may resume some activity, but at lower price levels and a slower pace than before, as China looks to Brazil and Argentina to meet its vast demand.

Though the soybeans were intended to feed the Chinese pig industry, not humans, the specter of waste looms both in terms of the potential spoilage of soybeans and the actual human food that could have been grown in their place.



Mature soybeans sit unharvested in an Indiana field in October 2025.

Jeremy Hogan/Getty Images

Other efforts lead to more waste

Since taking office, the second Trump administration has taken many steps aimed at efficiency that actually boosted food waste. Mass firings of food safety personnel risks even more outbreaks of foodborne diseases, tainted imports, and agricultural pathogens – which can erupt into crises requiring mass destruction, for instance, of nearly 35,000 turkeys with bird flu in Utah.

In addition, the administration canceled a popular program that helped schools and food banks buy food from local farmers, though many of the crops had already been planted when the cancellation announcement was made. That food had to find new buyers or risk being wasted, too. And the farmers were unable to count on a key revenue source to keep their farms afloat.

Also, the administration slashed funding for the Federal Emergency Management Agency that helped food producers, restaurants and households recover from disasters – including restoring power to food-storage refrigeration.

The fall 2025 government shutdown left the government's major food aid program, SNAP, in limbo for weeks, derailing communities' ability to meet their basic needs. Grocers, who benefit substantially from SNAP funds, announced discounts for SNAP recipients – to help them afford food and to keep food supplies moving before they rotted. The Department of Agriculture ordered them not to, saying SNAP customers must pay the same prices as other customers.

Food waste did not start with the Trump administration. But the administration's policies – though they claim to be seeking efficiency – have compounded voluminous waste at a time of growing need. This Thanksgiving, think about wasted food – as a problem, and as a symptom of larger problems.

American University School of International Service master's student Laurel Levin contributed to the writing of this article.

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