

**HD** Wasting food can eat away the future

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Wasting food can eat away the future

Feeding the planet is a enormous undertaking - food production gobbles up resources and a third of it is wasted.

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Grow a few vegetables in the backyard or spend time catching your dinner in the surf and you'll get some appreciation for the enormity of the global food system. Feeding 23 million people in Australia every day, or 7 billion-plus worldwide is an almost unimaginably complex undertaking. The release of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report this week showed that feeding the global population is likely to become even more complex and difficult as greenhouse gas levels rise, temperatures increase, and rainfall patterns become more volatile around the planet. Since the 1960s, intensive agriculture has dramatically increased our capacity to produce food. While we are now capable of feeding 7 billion, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) has shown that some of our food systems are incredibly inefficient. The FAO, in its Food Waste Footprint report, estimated that a staggering one-third of all food produced is never consumed. That's 1.3 billion tonnes a year lost or wasted at some point between the farm and our plates. This would need 1.4 billion hectares of land to produce. Australia has only a little more than 45 million hectares of arable land, so it's an enormous loss and one that has significant implications for our impact on the planet. As would be expected from the sheer size of the undertaking, agriculture and the global food system are considerable consumers of resources. Irrigated agriculture accounts for about 70 per cent of all fresh water used, and the food system as a whole is estimated to be responsible for up to a third of all human-caused greenhouse gas emissions. Embedded in wasted food are all of the materials, energy, water, land, and human resources that went into

producing, harvesting, transporting, storing and preparing it. The FAO says lost and wasted production on a global scale adds an estimated 3.3 gigatonnes of greenhouse gases to the atmosphere each year, for zero gain. This 3.3 gigatonnes is about six times the total annual greenhouse gas emissions from Australia, or about a third of the annual emissions from China, with its massive industries and 1.3 billion inhabitants. The IPCC has calculated a growing global demand for food of 14 per cent every decade and has shown that yields of several of our most important crop species are already declining under the effects of climate change. Reducing waste in the food system makes even more sense under these conditions. A global strategy to reduce waste must include firm research and development goals and an extensive skills training program, particularly for smallholder farmers (there are an estimated 500 million smallholder farms around the planet). Governments have an important role to play in establishing infrastructure, in promoting a global approach and in nurturing partnerships between new and existing industry participants. Many of the necessary elements are already in place. But what is urgently required is the will and wherewithal to implement strategies that seriously address the shortfalls in the system. Doing something about food waste is not restricted to those directly involved in the industry, however. There are important things that we

can do as individuals, families and communities. As food moves from the farm to the plate, the economic and environmental costs accumulate. Reducing food waste in our homes has an impact because it is eliminating the waste of the often significant embedded costs of transport, storage, processing and marketing. Like insulation and low-energy light bulbs, it's a win-win situation, with significant savings possible for the savvy consumer and for the environment. In NSW, where it has been closely monitored, it

has been calculated that households waste up to 315 kilograms, or more than \$1000 worth of food a year. Multiplied across the country, that's \$8billion of household food purchases wasted in Australia every year. In the United States, the estimated cost of food loss and waste, based on

farm gate prices, is an astonishing \$US750billion (\$811billion). Reducing food waste in the home can be as simple as planning purchases and meals in advance, storing food appropriately, only cooking what can be eaten in a reasonable timeframe and making sure leftovers are consumed. We've grown accustomed to supermarket shelves filled with blemish-free produce, but this luxury can come at a high price. All too easily, unfavourable environmental conditions or simply natural variation can **lead** to produce that, despite farmers' best efforts, fails to meet tight market specifications. Perfection is fine in principle, but not if the cost is that good food goes to waste or that farmers are unfairly penalised for the vagaries of nature. Shopping where a range of produce is available can be a powerful way to send a message that you care and

that imperfect produce is acceptable and even sometimes more desirable. A single-minded focus on price and convenience has guided the development of the current food retailing system. Of course, there's nothing wrong with convenience and a good price. But knowing where our food comes from, or better still, knowing the people who produce it, helps us to make informed choices and to understand its true value. Urbanisation is often cited as one of the defining global trends of the 21st century. As our cities grow, we can easily remain insulated from the source of our food and those who produce it. Alternatively, we can engage more meaningfully with it so that we can make choices that support sustainable practices. Shopping at farmers markets, buying locally produced food, or supporting food businesses that

promote transparency and connections can at the moment be less convenient, but there is real long-term value in supporting a diversified food system that is more responsive to the needs of growers, consumers and the environment. Advances in agriculture and logistics have meant that **billions** of people the world over are food-secure. But 842 **million** people experience chronic hunger, malnutrition and food insecurity, and **millions** more suffer from diet-related diseases such as heart disease, diabetes and cancer. The IPCC has sent us a stark reminder that despite the successes, a fully functioning food system is an ongoing project and we all have a major **stake** in its success. Dr Brian Jones is from faculty of agriculture and environment at the University of Sydney.

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