ReFED Date Labeling Standardization Tool

ReFED | Rethink Food Waste
Through Economics & Data

Context

Food waste is a major social, environmental, and economic issue.

Current date labeling causes confusion with consumers.

Voluntary standardization of date labeling by industry can help to reduce confusion and food that is unnecessarily thrown away.

The Food Marketing Institute (FMI) and Grocery Manufacturers Association (GMA) recommend consumer products packaging uses two standard phrases:

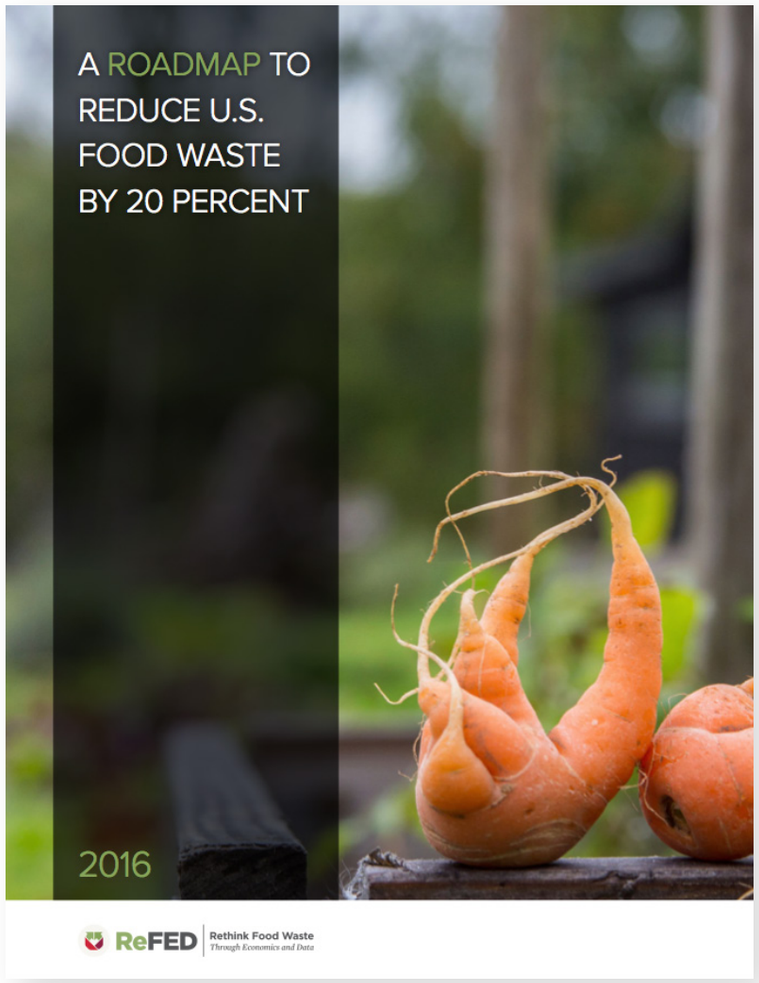
BEST IF USED BY

Describes product quality, where the product may not taste or perform as expected but is safe to use or consume.

USE BY

Applies to the few products that are highly perishable and/or have a food safety concern over time; these products should be consumed by the date listed on the package – and disposed of after that date.

ReFED's Date Labeling Work Stream



ReFED is a multi-stakeholder nonprofit, powered by an influential network of the nation's leading business, nonprofit, foundation, and government leaders committed to reducing U.S. food waste.

ReFED has identified 27 of the best solutions through the *Roadmap to Reduce U.S. Food Waste by 20 Percent*. The top three solutions to reducing food waste with the greatest economic value per ton are Standardized Date Labeling, Consumer Education Campaigns, and Packaging Adjustments.

ReFED convened a multi-stakeholder Date Labeling Working Group to agree on which products should receive the quality and the discard date labels.

The Working Group determined that a date labeling standardization tool using a decision tree approach would be the most valuable output to develop, in order to be both comprehensive of the range of existing food products and adaptable to new products.

The decision tree outlined in this document is the result of many months of development and revisions based on working group and other expert input from legal and food safety experts.

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Intention of the Tool

This tool is intended for food manufacturers to determine whether a quality label or a discard label should be placed on their products. This tool is not intended to be used by, or communicated directly to consumers.

WHAT THE TOOL DOES

- Should help limit the number of products that are assigned a discard label and will reduce the unnecessary waste of products that are still safe to consume.
- Addresses the date label for a package before opened, not after opened. Manufacturer may put additional guidance for “Once opened, eat within X days.”

WHAT THE TOOL DOESN'T DO

- Not designed to guide the dates chosen, i.e., the time period. The time period should be determined by the manufacturer's technical experts and based on best science available.
- Not intended to address nutrient content deterioration over time.
- Does not constitute any legal advice or supersede any State-level date label regulations. It is entirely industry driven. Companies should make their own decisions about compliance needs and meeting consumer expectations.

ASSUMPTIONS

1. This tool focuses on specific pathogens that can grow under refrigerated temperatures, e.g., Listeria and Yersinia and not pathogens like E. coli, botulism and Salmonella.

2. The quality and discard labels follow the recommendations from FMI/GMA: quality label should be “BEST If Used By” and discard label should be ”USE By.”

3. The product is handled and stored appropriately throughout the supply chain.

4. Consumers follow safe handling and cooking instructions.

5. The discard label should also include freezing instructions if appropriate for product, e.g., “USE By: XXX, FREEZE By: XXX.” It should be clear to the consumer that if they freeze the product by the USE By date, it is safe to eat.

Logic Behind the Tool Steps

Please see the Guidelines document for further background information on the tool.

1. 

REFRIGERATION

This categorizes those products that require refrigeration for both safety and spoilage (the state to which food deteriorates and develops unpleasant characteristics such as an undesirable taste or odor making the food not wholesome, but does not cause illness).

2. 

READY TO EAT (RTE)

If a product is RTE, there is no “kill” step (a process that adequately reduces microorganisms of public health concern) so the product may present a potential safety risk. If it is not RTE, then we assume there will be a “kill” step and the product will be labeled with additional cooking and handling instructions, which are separate from the date label.

3. 

RISK OF PATHOGEN

This step identifies those RTE products that are higher risk of pathogens despite being refrigerated, e.g., may be prone to Listeria growth. The intention of this step is to provide another level of analysis to further narrow the list of products to receive a discard date label.

The Date Labeling Standardization Tool

1. REFRIGERATION

In its packaged form and prior to opening, does the food require refrigeration or freezing?

- ✗ NO → **BEST IF USED BY** / **NO LABEL**
- ✓ YES → 2.

2. READY TO EAT (RTE)

Is the food intended to be or is sold as Ready to Eat?

- ✗ NO → **BEST IF USED BY**
- ✓ YES → 3.

3. RISK OF PATHOGEN

Does the method in which the food was processed and packaged allow for a pathogen to grow under refrigeration or freezing to a level that could result in serious adverse health consequences?

- ✗ NO → **BEST IF USED BY**
- ✓ YES → **USE BY**

1. REFRIGERATION

In its packaged form and prior to opening, does the food require refrigeration or freezing?

NO: USE NO LABEL OR QUALITY DATE LABEL (“BEST IF USED BY”)

EXAMPLE PRODUCTS	
• Beverages containing 10% or more by volume of alcohol • Vinegar • Food grade salt • Solid sugars • Confectionery products consisting of flavored and/or colored sugars • Chewing gum • Bread products and other baked goods	• Canned • aseptically packaged products* • Dry packaged goods* • Condiments • Nuts • Seeds • Meat jerky products • Dry cured meats

YES: MOVE TO NEXT STEP

EXAMPLE PRODUCTS	
• Poultry • Beef • Pork • Lamb & game meat • Seafood • Pâté and meat spreads • Cut fruits & vegetables • Cooked fruit & vegetables • Pre-cooked noodles • Pre-cooked rice • Eggs • Prepared salads & sandwiches	• Sushi • Non-pasteurized & pasteurized milk and milk products • Vegan proteins (e.g., tofu) • Frozen foods • Custard & cream tarts • Oil with real garlic • Seed sprouts • Packaged foods that contain one or more of these products

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NOTES ON THIS STEP:

The products listed are intended to be indicative, not exhaustive.

* Manufacturers that produce low-acid or shelf-stable dairy products should consider additional review with their food safety and quality assurance teams based on specific product specifications.

2. READY TO EAT (RTE)

Is the food intended to be or is sold as Ready to Eat?

NO: USE QUALITY DATE LABEL ("BEST IF USED BY")

EXAMPLE PRODUCTS
• Raw poultry • Raw beef • Raw pork • Raw lamb & game meat • Raw seafood • Raw eggs • Non-cooked vegan proteins (e.g., seitan) • Frozen foods (e.g. frozen entrees) • Raw cut fruits & vegetables intended to be cooked

YES: MOVE TO NEXT STEP

EXAMPLE PRODUCTS	
• Deli meats • Frankfurters • Pâté and meat spreads • Raw cut fruits & vegetables intended to be eaten raw • Cooked fruit & vegetables • Pre-cooked noodles • Pre-cooked rice • Pre-cooked eggs • Prepared salads & sandwiches • Sushi	• Non-pasteurized and pasteurized milk and milk products • Tofu and precooked tempeh • Custard & cream tarts • Oil with real garlic • Seed sprouts • Packaged foods that contain one or more of these products

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NOTES ON THIS STEP:

The products listed are intended to be indicative, not exhaustive.

A key assumption is that consumers follow safe handling and cooking instructions.

3. RISK OF PATHOGEN

Does the method in which the food was processed and packaged allow for a pathogen to grow under refrigeration or freezing to a level that could result in serious adverse health consequences?

NO: USE QUALITY DATE LABEL ("BEST IF USED BY")

EXAMPLE PRODUCTS & PROCESSES

- Products with pH and water activity that sufficiently reduce pathogen growth risk (e.g., hard cheese)
- Pasteurized products (e.g., pasteurized milk)
- Products treated with high pressure pasteurization (e.g., many guacamole products)
- Products with antimicrobial ingredients (e.g., deli meats treated with anti-Listeria agent)

YES: DISCARD DATE LABEL ("USE BY")

EXAMPLE PRODUCTS & PROCESSES

Products with pH and water activity that do NOT sufficiently reduce pathogen growth risk and that have NOT been treated with processes that mitigate against pathogen growth. Some common examples include:

- Deli meats
- Pâté and meat spreads
- Unpasteurized milk & soft cheeses
- Smoked seafood
- Cooked ready-to-eat crustaceans
- Prepared salads & sandwiches
- Sushi
- Packaged foods that contain one or more of these products

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NOTES ON THIS STEP:

The products listed are intended to be indicative, not exhaustive.

The selection of which date label to use should be based on the manufacturer's risk assessment for that specific product.

Contact & Next Steps

Please email Eva Goulbourne, Director of Business & Multistakeholder Programs, info@refed.com

PROVIDE FEEDBACK

Share your answers to the public comment questionnaire by August 31st.
refed.com/questionnaire

PARTICIPATE

If you are a manufacturer, engage with ReFED to design a pilot project to test the tool and to receive dedicated support for the transition to the two-label system.

Thank you for taking the time to engage in this important step to reduce food waste through date labeling standardization.

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