

INTRODUCTION:

Food Waste: An Introduction to the Issue and Questions that Remain:

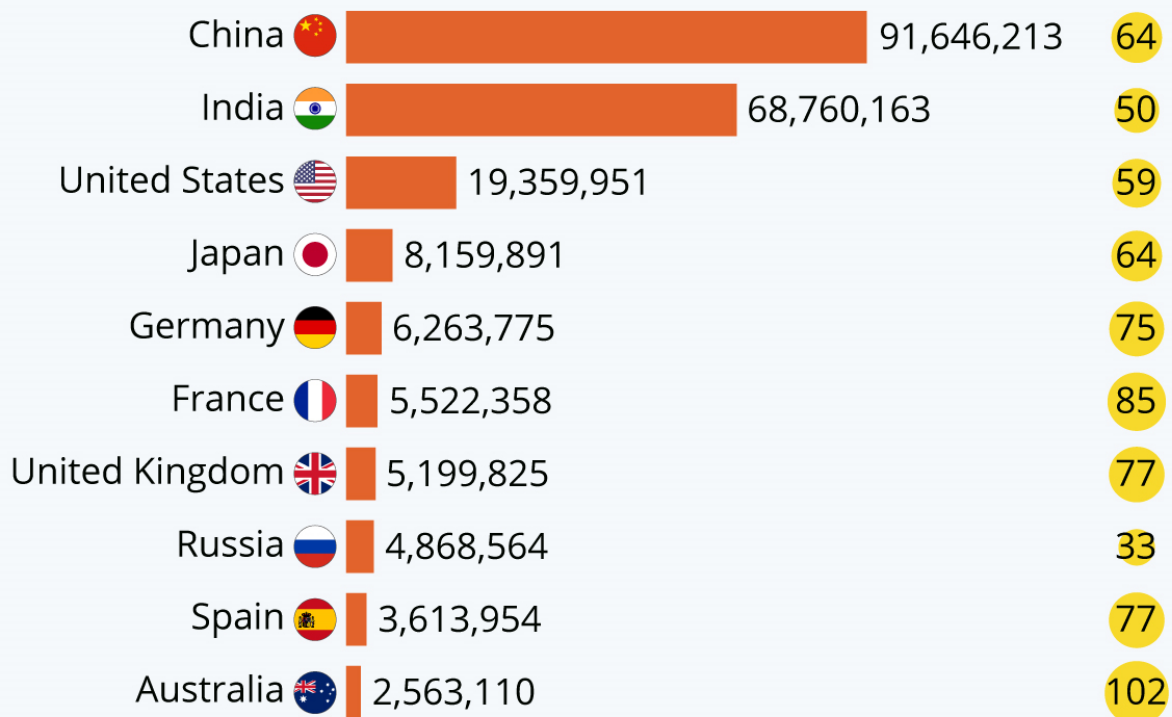
Food waste is a problem throughout the supply chain and across the globe that is increasingly capturing the attention of policymakers. Gustavsson et al. (2011) estimated that one-third of the food produced for consumption globally is lost or wasted. Within the U.S., Buzby et al. (2014) estimated that 31% of food available at the retail and consumer levels was wasted, which translates to a loss of \$161 billion and 141 trillion calories per year (enough calories to feed ~ 193,000,000 people a daily diet of 2,000 calories for a year!)

The Enormous Scale of Global Food Waste

Total annual household food waste produced in selected countries*



- Total food waste per year (tonnes)
- Estimated food waste per capita (kg)



* UNEP estimates with high or medium confidence
Source: UNEP Food Waste Index Report 2021



How is food waste defined?

Discussions on food waste may also reference the term “food loss”; the terms sound synonymous, but there are distinctions between the two. An ERS report by Buzby et al. (2014) uses the following definitions for food loss and food waste:

- “**Food loss** represents the amount of edible food, postharvest, that is available for human consumption but is not consumed for any reason. It includes cooking loss and natural shrinkage; loss from mold, pests, or inadequate climate control; and plate waste.”
- “**Food waste** is a component of food loss and occurs when an edible item goes unconsumed, such as food discarded by retailers due to undesirable color or blemishes and plate waste discarded by consumers.”

Efforts to address food loss have been ongoing in developing countries, such as improvements in harvesting and storage technology, biological controls, etc. For more on research addressing food loss (postharvest loss), see Affognon et al. (2015) and Hodges et al. (2011). Conversely, efforts to address food waste have been more recent. The remainder of this article focuses on the more narrowly defined issue of food waste.