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Back

### Is This Still Good? What Those Dates on Food Really Mean

by Danielle Dresden

You pull a half-full container out of the refrigerator and hesitate. The "Sell by" date was a few days ago. You sniff it. It smells fine, but you decide it's better to be safe than sorry and toss it anyway.

Sound familiar? Despite the frightening science experiments most of us have grown in our refrigerators at some point, we too often throw away perfectly good food.

Confusion about the relationship between expiration dates and food safety causes us to squander mountains of food, money, and natural resources. It even contributes to global climate change.

Fortunately, there are potential solutions to this multifaceted problem; some are for individuals, while others involve food, health, commerce, and public policy at the complex intersection of the food system and the law.

#### Why it's called "waste"

"Forty percent of the food we produce in the United States ends up in a landfill," says Emily Broad Lieb, director of the Food Law and Policy Clinic at Harvard Law School's Center for Health Law and Policy Innovation, Jamaica Plain, Mass.

With 49 million Americans, or 14.5% of households, experiencing food insecurity in 2012, this is no time to throw away 160 billion pounds of food a year. Dana Gunders, of the Natural Resources Defense Council, New York, writes that reducing food waste by 15% could free up resources to feed more than half of them.

Food waste takes a toll on the environment, due to resources consumed in pointless production. Gunders estimates that 25% of the fresh water used in the U.S. goes into producing food destined for the landfill, not hungry mouths. To make matters worse, once in the landfill, this wasted food decomposes and produces methane, a more powerful greenhouse gas than carbon dioxide.

Lieb says households spend \$1,300 to \$2,200 a year on food that goes uneaten, and a significant portion of that waste probably stems

*Consumers  
frequently confuse*

from misunderstanding expiration dates. Studies in the United Kingdom found that 20% of household food waste is due to confusion about whether or not food is still good, Lieb says.

*food quality with  
food safety.*

Manufacturers lose, too. Lieb reports that expiration date labeling costs businesses \$900 million a year, before products even reach consumers.

### **What's in a label?**

There are three audiences for food date labels—consumers, manufacturers, and retailers—and they all have different needs, which contributes to the confusion surrounding food expiration dates, according to David Fikes, vice president of Consumer/Community Affairs and Communications for the Food Marketing Institute, Arlington, Va.

Consumers want to make sure the food they eat is safe. Manufacturers want consumers to use products at their peak. Retailers want fresh products for their customers. The problem is that consumers frequently misinterpret manufacturers' messages to retailers, and conflate food safety with food quality.

"When we say 'Best if used by,' we mean that literally because that's when you're going to get the most value for your dollar," Fikes says. "The intent of it, on the part of many, was to give consumers information, so their enjoyment of the product is enhanced."

"Sell by" dates let retailers know when to rotate stock and pull items from shelves. As long as the food is unopened and stored properly, it generally is safe to eat for some time after the "Sell by" date. Since the food is still fit for human consumption, Fikes says, many retailers donate these items to food banks. Food past its "Sell by" date can also be recycled for animal use, and—unfortunately—it's also discarded.

Lieb estimates that only about 1% of the food supply becomes a threat to safety when it goes past its prime. Along with dairy products and eggs, items to be careful about include deli meats and unreheated frankfurters.

*The three food-date-label audiences—consumers, manufacturers, and retailers—have different needs.*

However, as Fikes points out, "Drinking sour milk is not a safety issue. It's a yuck factor."

Lieb notes that outbreaks of foodborne illness can heighten consumers' anxiety and confusion. "Salmonella is not linked to an expiration date," she says. While it's important to purchase, store, and prepare food properly to avoid serious health risks, she says, "The number of days you keep something in the fridge has nothing to do with whether you get a foodborne illness."

### **Changing labels, changing tastes**

Not only are consumers frequently confused by food date labels, the labels themselves aren't consistent. That's because, although the Food and Drug Administration and the United States Agriculture Department have the authority to set standards, Fikes says current federal regulations only cover baby formula, vitamins, and prescription drugs.

It's state laws that cover most food date labels. Different phrases are used in different states,

these phrases have different meanings, different methodologies are used to set expiration dates, and a product needing a label in one state might not need one in another.

In addition, Lieb points out, "If you look at state laws, they're not science-based." They're also changeable, with four states changing their food date laws in 2012 alone.

This crazy quilt of regulation creates logistical headaches for food manufacturers. Fikes says food manufacturers producing yogurt sold in multiple states need to make sure trucks set out with products labeled correctly for their destinations.

*Forty percent of the food produced in America is wasted.*

Fikes is optimistic that, working together, manufacturers, retailers, and consumers can develop a sort of labeling lingua franca that meets the needs of all three stakeholder groups.

"We need some federal standard language that will say these dates are not safety-based, they're about best taste and best quality," Lieb says. "Once we have that, we can educate consumers."

Consumer education is essential, Fikes agrees, especially "when consumers won't even look at a blemished sweet potato."

"People have become so reliant on external indicators," Lieb says, they need to be reminded about the basics, like storing food properly and looking out for hazards, such as mold or food that tastes bad.

If you're ever uncertain whether to keep or toss a certain food item, consider looking online for information about specific products. [StillTasty.com](http://StillTasty.com) is one such site, and Fikes says the Food Management Institute worked with multiple partners to develop its own informational site, [Food Keeper](http://FoodKeeper).

"One of the names we were talking about for the site was, 'Is this still good?'" Fikes said. Developing a more systematic approach to food dating could do a lot of good for consumers, manufacturers, retailers, and the planet.

Meanwhile, stick with a combination of the smell test, sell date, and common sense.

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