

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

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THE NUMBERS

Easy Fix to Cut Food Waste: Cleaning Up Date Labels

Stamps like ‘use by,’ ‘expires on,’ ‘best by’ sow consumer confusion and waste; new labeling rules could help



Household food waste accounts for 40% of all food waste in the U.S, according to an environmental advocacy group. PHOTO: GABBY JONES/BLOOMBERG

By Jo Craven McGinty

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The average American family spends \$1,800 a year on food that is ultimately trashed, according to one estimate. But a simple fix could cut household food waste in half: better date labels.

Food manufacturers, the government and activists have all come to believe that uncertainty over the meaning of labels such as “use by,” “sell by,” “expires on,” “best by” and “fresh by”—to

name a few—have led consumers to throw out perfectly good food for fear that it may no longer be safe to eat.

“Household food waste accounts for 40% of all food waste in the U.S., and we estimate that 20% of household food waste is due to confusion over date labels,” said JoAnne Berkenkamp, senior advocate for the Natural Resources Defense Council, an environmental advocacy group, which also provided the estimate of the amount families spend on discarded food.

To remedy the problem, some manufacturers have adopted voluntary standards that streamline the labels to just two phrases—“best by,” a measure of quality, and “use by,” a safety flag.

In addition, the U.S. House and Senate introduced bills this month using the same two phrases to establish requirements for applying the quality and discard dates.

There are two myths that drive the confusion over food date labels.

First, many consumers believe they are federally regulated, but apart from rules for infant formula, they are not. Second, consumers often assume the labels indicate when food has become unsafe, but until recently, that hasn't been the case.

A study by researchers at Johns Hopkins University, Harvard University and the National Consumers League published this year in the peer-reviewed journal *Waste Management* measured the extent of the problem.

The researchers surveyed a nationally representative sample of consumers and found that 36% believed food date labels are federally regulated, and another 26% were unsure. In addition, 37% reported that they always or usually discard food when it is near the date stamped on the package, and 84% said they do so at least occasionally.

In many cases, there is no safety issue at stake when food is used after the date on its package, and often a visual inspection and a sniff are better indicators of safety than a date stamp.

But there are important exceptions.

Some perishables may become contaminated with undetectable bacteria such as listeria. As a matter of safety, those foods should be discarded when the “use by” date has passed.

“You won't be able to smell or sense it, and it can grow at normal refrigerator temperatures,” said Roni A. Neff, who directs the Food System Sustainability Program at the Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future. “That means time is the factor that is important.”

SHARE YOUR THOUGHTS

How do you use “sell by” or “best before” notices on food labels? Share your experiences below.

To help manufacturers determine whether products should be labeled “best by” or “use by,” ReFED, a think tank that works to reduce food waste, offers the following guidelines:

“Use by” dates—flagging when food is no longer safe—should be applied to ready-to-eat foods such as meat spreads, sushi and prepared salads and sandwiches, all of which require refrigeration and could potentially harbor pathogens that can grow even when the products are refrigerated or frozen. The Johns Hopkins and Harvard study adds deli meats and soft cheeses to this list.

“Best by” dates—indicating when food is no longer at peak quality—should be applied to raw poultry, meats and seafood, cured meats, bread and baked goods, canned and dry goods, nuts and seeds, and cut fruits and vegetables that are meant to be cooked.

In addition to confusion over the meaning of food date labels, the Harvard and Johns Hopkins study found that consumers sometimes worry about the wrong products. Raw chicken was most frequently discarded “always” or “most of the time,” but because it is eaten cooked, it isn’t considered high-risk.

“What’s really important about the new set of labels is that it will help us see that most of the time we don’t need to worry,” Dr. Neff said. “It is a quality issue, not a safety issue.”

By the end of the year, the Grocery Manufacturers Association anticipates that 98% of packaged goods—the kinds of products made by manufacturers such as PepsiCo, Kellogg and Post—will voluntarily carry the “best by” and “use by” labels.

Still, advocates say the federal legislation is necessary to overcome a patchwork of state laws. Nineteen states require date-label language that is different from the food industry’s recommended language, according to Harvard’s Food Law and Policy Clinic.

“Voluntary standards are not sufficient to overcome state regulations,” Ms. Berkenkamp said. “We need federal legislation to do that.”

But, she said, with a few exceptions, consumers should also learn to trust their senses.

“I see it all the time that households have one person who sniffs and another one who tosses,” Ms. Berkenkamp said. “The sniffers should win out.”

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