

We all need to try to curb food waste

by Mark Pavilons

Food waste is an atrocity that is reducible, if not completely avoidable, said Stephen Hough.

It seems we are living in an era of waste in all areas of our lives. I have to agree wholeheartedly with Hough in that food waste is something we can't ignore.

All types of food are wasted, but in Canada the most prominently wasted foods by weight are: vegetables, 30%; fruit, 15%; leftovers, 13%; bread and bakery, 9%, and dairy and eggs, 7%

To put that in perspective, every day in Canada we waste 470,000 heads of lettuce, 1,200,000 tomatoes, 2,400,000 potatoes, 750,000 loaves of bread, 1,225,000 apples, 555,000 bananas, 1,000,000 cups of milk, and 450,000 eggs.

Canada's 2.2 million tonnes of avoidable household food waste is equivalent to 9.8 million tonnes of CO2 and 2.1 million cars on the road!

I detest waste and these numbers make me shudder. Maybe it's because my parents were living with post-war scarcity in their homelands. Maybe it's because I'm the father of a compassionate humanitarian volunteer. Maybe it's just common sense.

I will admit, every time I scrape off the dinner plates into the trash, I pause for a brief moment and count my blessings. I don't think our household generates a lot of food waste, but even the smallest amount is a shame.

Italy has just introduced incentives to end food waste. They are pressuring businesses that sell food to donate unsold food to charities, instead of throwing it away. While their goal is to save tax dollars, Italy is giving garbage collection tax breaks to businesses that take part in the initiative.

France is nudging their businesses to do the same, implementing fines for those who toss too much.

A French politician is looking to pass an EU-wide proposal to end food waste in all member countries.

In Denmark they have food waste stores along with regular grocery stores.

To me, this sounds like a no-brainer. The environmental, economic and ethical benefits are crystal clear.

Most of us know full well that the majority of food waste is perfectly edible by the time it hits the dumpster.

I remember a classic Seinfeld episode where George eats an éclair resting on top of the kitchen garbage bin. He was chastised profusely but it revealed a mind set of not touching garbage.

When I see images of children in developing nations scouring massive garbage dumps for scraps, my heart goes out to them.

Some of us aren't fully aware of the extent of waste food that is not refuse but simply incorrectly labelled, packaged or scratched and dented.

The updated Strategy, now called A Food Loss and Waste Strategy for Canada, recommends a coordinated national effort to halve food waste by 2030. A key theme of the strategy calls for a supply chain approach that would close the loop on food waste occurring during production, processing and distribution before it even gets to consumers.

Here's a kick in the knees: "More than a third of the food Canada produces never gets eaten," says Malcolm Brodie, chair of the National Zero Waste Council. "Half of this waste occurs on the supply side, and the rest at home. Though many food waste reduction activities are already underway, they are mostly happening in isolation from each other. We can achieve far greater success through collaboration and a unified vision for change."

The report takes into consideration the logistical challenges of Canada's vast geography and sparse population centres, as well as the fact that most businesses involved in food production, distribution and retail operate on a relatively small scale. The report recommendations, broadly supported by a diverse range of stakeholders, include a federal government commitment to reduce food waste; new regulations clarifying "best before" dates and better tracking and distribution of food.

Along those lines, I think the "best before" trend has become a little silly. Perhaps it's a way for food companies to make more money, or maybe it's a legal thing. But when I was a kid, canned food never expired. My potato chips never lasted long enough to expire. Things made with vinegar take decades to spoil.

I recall volunteering for a local food bank and when sorting we had to toss all of the expired food, even items that were due to expire within a month or so. KD? Doesn't that last forever?

Some food industry leaders are coming to the table. Companies like Kraft Heinz Canada, Loblaw Companies Ltd, Maple Leaf Foods, Metro Inc., Save-On-Foods, Sobeys Inc., Unilever Canada and Walmart Canada are taking action to reduce food waste in their own operations.

The National Zero Waste Council and Provision Coalition have been selected as key collaborators in this endeavor due to their own leadership on food loss and waste, providing resources and support.

"Food loss and waste present social, environment and economic challenges for communities, governments and businesses across the country. These challenges demand bold, collaborative action," says Malcolm Brodie, chair of the National Zero Waste Council.

I know there are still some legal issues and logistical hurdles to overcome. But hopefully, within a few short years, we can reduce waste and help spread the food wealth.

Something to think about.