

# Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

## We must stop wasting food

There's plenty to eat, but still people go hungry

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By Danielle Nierenberg and Matt Styslingher

When was the last time you looked way in the back of your refrigerator -- where the three-week old Chinese takeout leftovers are hiding? It's not pleasant, is it? Not to sound like your mother, but don't you know there are starving children in Africa?

Whether through the Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank's efforts to feed the poor or the food waste composting programs of the Pennsylvania Resources Council and Steel City Soils, Pittsburgh-area residents have a lot they can do to curb food waste. Yet most of us still neglect precious and relatively easy opportunities to do so.

In the United States, an estimated 40 percent of edible food is thrown away by retailers and households. Food waste accounts for 12 percent of total U.S. waste each year. Across industrialized countries, some 222 million tons of edible food is wasted annually -- nearly as much as the 230 million tons that sub-Saharan Africa produces.

Uneaten food not only represents wasted opportunities to feed approximately 925 million hungry people worldwide and the wasted resources used to produce that food, it also contributes to global warming. Rotting food emits methane, a greenhouse gas more than 20 times as potent as carbon dioxide. Food in landfills accounts for 34 percent of the total methane produced in the United States.

America's per-capita food waste has increased 50 percent since 1974. Meanwhile, in much of Africa over 40 percent of crops go bad before they can be eaten. Lack of disease and pest control, proper storage, transportation and infrastructure all work against impoverished small farmers. As mountains of food are thrown out every day in rich countries, farmers in Africa -- the epicenter of world hunger - are losing mountains of food before it hits the table.

Now that I've got you standing with the refrigerator door open, smelling that soggy takeout container and feeling guilty, the good news is that there are many ways we can reduce waste -- and none involve you eating that unidentified, fuzzy green stuff you had forgotten about.

The Greater Pittsburgh Community Food Bank distributes about 21 million pounds of donated food per year in 11 southwestern Pennsylvania counties through soup kitchens, food pantries, shelters, after-school programs and community centers.

The Pennsylvania Resources Council helps residents and businesses compost food scraps by offering workshops and by designing waste reduction facilities through its Zero Waste Pittsburgh project.

Steel City Soils collects organic waste from coffee shops, restaurants, markets, landscapers, wood mills and brewers through its ComposTable program. Food waste from participating establishments ends up as rich soil that is used by area farmers producing organic food.

Overseas, for the past two years the Worldwatch Institute's Nourishing the Planet team has traveled to 25 countries across sub-Saharan Africa and found many success stories, including innovations in reducing post-harvest food losses. The team's findings are highlighted in a report titled "State of the World 2011: Innovations that Nourish the Planet."

In the absence of expensive, Western-style grain stores and processing facilities, there are simple ways to help farmers prevent damage to their harvests. In Pakistan, for example, the United Nations helped cut storage losses up to 70 percent by replacing jute bags and mud construction with metal grain silos. Purdue University helps communities in rural Niger maintain year-round cowpea supplies by making available low-cost, hermetically sealed plastic bags. Another West African project uses solar energy to dry mangoes after harvest, many of which otherwise would go bad before reaching markets.

We can offer these initiatives our support. And we can try to reduce our own waste at home by not buying more than we need, composting table scraps and encouraging local grocery stores and restaurants to donate leftovers to food banks and homeless shelters.

We also can put pressure on governments, funders and nonprofit organizations working here and abroad not to let food aid funding go to waste by overlooking simple ways to protect harvests. The world produces plenty of food to feed everyone. We just have to put it all to good use.

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