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Simple lifestyle changes can reduce food waste

BY DANIELLE NIERENBERG AND JULIA EDER, CALGARY HERALD NOVEMBER 14, 2011

How many of our mothers reminded us of the hungry kids in Africa when we left the table with food on our plate?

While a half-eaten sandwich here or a forgotten apple there may not appear like much, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization estimates that wealthy countries waste 222 million tonnes of food annually.

In Canada alone, we waste enough food in one month to fill Edmonton's Commonwealth Stadium with its 60,000 seats to overflowing.

According to the Canadian ministry of the Environment, organic waste is the largest ingredient of solid waste that ends up in city dumps.

When food rots away in landfills, it turns into methane, a greenhouse gas that is 20 times more potent than carbon dioxide. But effective initiatives to reduce the amount of waste ending up in landfills in Alberta do exist. From composting food waste into fertilizer to delivering surplus to the needy, these initiatives are making a difference.

Alberta faces unique recycling challenges. The geographic area is vast, population density in most cases is relatively low, and so collection of recycled materials can be difficult.

Although there are 60 composting facilities in Alberta, composting in one's own backyard is an easy way to recycle organic waste and produce free, nutrient-rich fertilizer for gardens and lawns. At the International Compost Awareness Week in May of this year, exhibitions, lectures and workshops highlighted the importance of recycling organic waste and provided information on how people can practise this at home; for example, through backyard composting or vermicomposting, which uses worms to compost organic waste.

Besides composting, another way to cut back on food waste is to donate excess to a food pantry, which can then be used to feed the hungry. According to Statistics Canada, Canada's national statistical agency, 2.3 million people in Canada lack adequate access to food year-round. In Alberta, food insecurity affects nine per cent of the people. Within the Alberta Food Bank Network

Association, there are almost 200 food banks and food hamper programs operating and distributing 1.5 million pounds of food and related products each year.

The University of Alberta houses a special food bank, themed hunger for knowledge, not food. Since 1991, the Campus Food Bank has distributed food and toiletries to students, staff, alumni and their children. Last year, they were able to distribute food for 2,500 individuals through events like trick-or-treat, where volunteers go door to door on Halloween collecting food donations for the Campus Food Bank.

Making use of what we already produce is important if we are to adequately feed a global population that has reached seven billion. One billion of them are malnourished and the millions of tonnes of food that is wasted by households, retailers and food services in developed countries would be enough to satisfy their hunger, as Worldwatch Institute's State of the World 2011: Innovations that Nourish the Planet report shows.

The report highlights agricultural innovations - including reductions in post-harvest losses - in sub-Saharan Africa that are helping alleviate hunger and poverty.

Food is a precious commodity, but it is not always treated that way in the Canada. Simple lifestyle changes, like keeping track of leftovers, recycling wastes as compost and donating surplus to food recovery programs can have profound effects.

Alberta is already making progress in reducing its food waste, but we need more of these types of initiatives if we are to significantly decrease the millions of tons of food that are thrown away each year.

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