

Mayor's Column  
November 27, 2017

This past week I attended several Thanksgiving dinners served to folks who were not financially able to provide their own. It made me grateful that our small Village "Giving Garden" did its small part by producing 200 plus pounds of vegetables that were distributed directly to area soup kitchens.

Most importantly, it caused me to reflect on all the food we waste daily while others go hungry. Worldwide, 1.3 billion tons of food will be thrown away this year and the United States contributes mightily to this total.

According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, a full 10% of our available food supply is wasted at the retail level and more than 20% is wasted in our homes. That's food worth more than \$160 billion while one in seven American households don't have enough to eat. Reducing food waste by just 15% would be enough to feed more than 25 million Americans yearly.

Getting food from farm to table uses 10% of our country's energy supply, 50% of our land and 80% of all fresh water consumed – yet 30% plus of all that is grown goes uneaten. This same uneaten food is the largest component of solid waste rotting in our landfills and producing record methane emissions. Methane gas can migrate significant distances and carries with it molecules of such toxins as pesticides, paint thinners and dry cleaning fluids.

Worldwide, France leads the way in addressing the food waste crisis as the first country to actually ban supermarkets from throwing away or destroying unsold food. Supermarkets of 4,300 square feet or more must sign donation contracts with charities or face stiff monetary penalties. The measure was passed unanimously by the French Senate and modest projections estimate at least ten million more meals were served to the hungry in the first year. The "no waste" movement was the result of a grassroots coalition of ordinary shoppers, anti-poverty groups and green organizations.

A very unusual provision of the French legislation also requires food banks and charities to share a legal obligation to stock donated foods in proper hygienic conditions and distribute with "dignity" – defined as only given out at accredited centers where human contact and conversation is fostered vs any street or truck handouts.

In addition, the law also makes it extremely easy for food factories to donate production overages directly to approved charities. England is not far behind requiring their major supermarket chains to enter agreements with the government, albeit not punishable by fine, to cut food and packaging waste.

The U.S. is the only country to have a “Good Samaritan” law, the Bill Emerson Food Donation Act, which removed liability for any illnesses caused by donated food. We also have a very favorable tax provision to incentivize supermarkets to donate unsold food. Supermarkets can discount the value of food given away from their taxes up to 10% of their aggregate income, clearly an incentive to donate.

Then why are we not leading the movement?

First, it is an awareness issue. According to a recent survey, only 53% of Americans think food waste is an issue. A John Hopkins study had it at 43% just two years ago so the trend is encouraging.

Also, food is cheaper in the U.S. than nearly any country in the world aided, (not with controversy), by significant corn, wheat, dairy and soy bean subsidies.

Americans, like most of the world populace, are also confused by the Sell by-Consume By packaging dates and often throw away food thinking they are avoiding foodborne illnesses.

Bottom line, our waste policy is consumer driven – a cultural, attitudinal desire to only eat perfectly shaped, unblemished, “pretty” food. We have a national obsession with the aesthetic vs nutritional quality of our food and this image is reinforced by the all the cooking shows/gourmet magazines where only “camera ready” products are used.

According to multiple consumer surveys, Americans also want to see an abundance of a product on a shelf especially fresh foods. We don’t ever want to buy from a near empty display. As a result, supermarkets have no incentive to order close to the margins, rather they add a little more to the purchase price to create the “abundant” effect from over purchasing.

The most major source of food waste is our national desire to purchase ready-made foods for the convenience. Prepared food cannot be repackaged or frozen by law or even allowed to be kept even one day to redistribute in most states. But the appetizer platters, specialized salads and rotisserie chickens are so in demand they are currently here to stay.

Currently, the most forward thinking answers to the food waste crisis emanate from the EU nations which provide a template from which to choose solutions tailored to U.S. conditions.