

FOCUS ON AGRICULTURE

For the week of: February 7, 2011

American Farm Bureau Federation

Let's Not Waste Food

By Stewart Truelsen

If you were a finicky eater as a child, you probably remember your parents admonishing you to eat everything on your plate because there was a poor child somewhere in the world who would surely love to trade places with you. This didn't make the meal any more appetizing; it just made you feel guilty.

There is still guilt attached to wasting food, more so than wasting water or energy. However, most food waste is unintentional; it's not like littering.

One of the problems is that refrigerators are larger today than generations ago and many families have freezers to store large amounts of food. We also shop at warehouse clubs like Costco and Sam's Club where groceries are sold in larger packaging. We're stocking more food than ever before and don't get around to eating all we bought.

Leftovers get pushed to the back of the refrigerator and aren't recognized again for days or weeks. Even in our pantries, there comes a day of reckoning when outdated cans and jars have to be thrown out.

But food waste is not just a personal issue. It occurs at all levels of the food chain, from farm to retail, and it's been a concern for millennia. After Jesus miraculously fed the five thousand with just five loaves and two fishes, his disciples took baskets to gather up the broken pieces that were leftover so nothing would be wasted.

In biblical days, the needy were also allowed to glean the fields of any grain left behind during harvest. Gleaning is still a practice today on a number of farms. Last year in Fulton County, Ohio, Farm Bureau member Tom O'Neill organized a harvest of 250,000 pounds of excess carrots for donation to food banks across the state. The effort was supported by 120 volunteers and provided more than 19,000 meals for local families.

In San Francisco, there is a movement to "re-plate" food. Unwanted sandwiches or similar items are wrapped and left on top of the city's covered trash receptacles for the homeless to pick up.

America's food abundance tends to make wasted food seem inconsequential. It isn't. At the same time, activists have seized on the issue as another example of what they think is wrong with our food system. That's not true.

By some estimates, a quarter or more of food ready for harvest in the United States goes uneaten. Some of this is unavoidable due to bad weather, but farmers do what they can to minimize losses. Many restaurants are cutting back on wasteful salad bars and buffets. Supermarkets waste less food than we might think, but what about us? One study found that

consumers are the single biggest contributor with 40 percent of food waste occurring in the home.

Maybe our parents were right all along. There are hungry people who could benefit from the food we waste and throw away.

-30-

Stewart Truelsen is a regular contributor to the Focus on Agriculture series and is author of a new book marking the American Farm Bureau Federation's 90th anniversary, Forward Farm Bureau.