Trash Talk

By Doug Scott

» Are you taking steps to reduce the waste generated by your kitchens and cafeteria?

Food is too important a thing in our lives to waste. Yet, according to the National Resources Defense Council (NRDC), the U.S. wastes a total of 40% of food every year, roughly 20 pounds per person each and every month! That equates to Americans trashing approximately $165 billion in food every year. But that is not the worst part of it. Almost all of the uneaten food ends up rotting in landfills, where it makes up the single largest component of municipal solid waste matter, accounting for what the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) estimates is 20% of U.S. methane emission levels.

Compared to the rest of the world, this country is shameful in the amount of food it sends to the trash. NRDC estimates that the average American consumer wastes 10 times as much food as someone in Southeast Asia. As a group, we do not appreciate the scope of the problem. A survey from LeanPath, Inc., an Oregon-based food waste prevention firm, discovered that 41.6% of Americans did not know that throwing away food has a negative environmental impact, 86.5% believe they waste less than other households and 25% think they don’t have the time to do something about it.

From an official standpoint, food waste is not simply measured by what is left on the plate or discarded in the garbage bin. Its losses are found in a wide variety of industries, including farming, postharvest and packaging, processing, distribution, retail sales, foodservice, household use and disposal. USDA reports that 4% to 10% of all food purchased in foodservice operations is wasted before it even reaches your plate. With that in mind, NRDC concludes that reducing this waste by just 15% would leave enough food to feed more than 25 million Americans each year.

USDA’s Economic Research Service (ERS) defines food waste as “the edible amount of food, postharvest, that is available for human consumption but is not consumed for any reason.” It includes cooking loss and natural shrinkage; loss from mold, pests or inadequate climate control—and just tossing of edible uneaten food.

WHAT ARE WE THINKING? “People have gotten into this perspective of, ‘It’s okay to throw away food,’” says Bryan Staley, PhD, president and CEO of the Environmental Research & Education Foundation (EREF). “But, I feel that, with more education about better waste management strategies as well as reducing unnecessary food waste, we can get that perception to change. "For example, it feels good to recycle, but food waste can contaminate very recyclable materials, like cardboard. You get grease or other food materials soaked into the cardboard, and it becomes un-recyclable. So, there are many issues that arise in foodservice when we talk about food waste, how to manage it and how to deal with it."

SNA Past President Jean Ronnei, SNS, is the former school nutrition director of St. Paul Public Schools. Today, she is a senior consultant with ProTeam and recently presented at SNA’s 2017 School Nutrition Industry Conference (SNIC) on this topic. “Unfortunately, food waste has just become a part of our culture, and, in some cases, perceived as a good thing to do,” she notes, “because you left food on your plate” rather than consuming unnecessary calories.
WHY IS THIS YOUR PROBLEM?

“Whose problem is food waste? School nutrition professionals should care because it’s an environmental issue and we all need to be good stewards of the planet,” says Ronnei. “Also, nobody wants to waste money. Doing research on this topic I was surprised about what I did not know!”

How can school nutrition professionals do their part to reduce the volume of food (and other) waste headed to America’s landfills? A two-pronged approach is required. One is to take steps to reduce what students discard at the end of the lunch period. The other is to reduce the amount of waste that is produced in the kitchen. Doing that, says Ronnei, also will result in savings of money and human resources that can be reinvested into other areas of the operation.

“It is important to understand why students waste food,” says Ronnei. “Do staff members automatically put food onto student trays? Do students understand they can turn down an item such as milk versus taking it?” She cites other possible factors: It may be because kids don’t have enough time to eat, class is dismissed late, there are too few meal periods, recess is scheduled after lunch, class parties are held before meal periods and kids are unfamiliar with the food served.

Food wasted in the kitchen could be because of untrained staff who are not following prescribed recipes or who have poor knife skills. Perhaps it’s because the manager is not properly using production records to forecast needs. Or it may be that a refrigerator/freezer is not holding its temperature and a muggy storeroom needs a dehumidifier.

TACKLING PLATE WASTE  “I feel like school nutrition professionals have one of the more challenging jobs in the school system, because they are tasked with making sure that kids not only have enough food to eat, but also making sure that the food has nutritional value,” notes Staley.

Complicating the issue is that school meal operations are required to serve certain food components and produce portions that provide mandated calorie minimums. In some regards, a cafeteria employee’s hands are tied. But there are strategies to try, ranging from improved culinary skills that heighten the flavor and eye-appeal of menu items to marketing techniques that children find compelling.

“A good strategy would be to rename a food item,” offers Staley. “So instead of calling it a Burrito Day, call it Big Bad Burrito Day, or instead of calling it a Grilled Cheese Sandwich, call it a Batman Sandwich. That has been done at several schools and we have found that food waste was reduced anywhere from 20% to 40%, by doing little more changing the name.”

IN THE KITCHEN  Ronnei suggests a three-step process to combat food waste, based on the EPA’s Food Recovery Hierarchy. Reduce food waste through improved ordering, prepping and storage; Recover wholesome, uneaten food and donate it to feed people in need; and Recycle discarded food for other uses, such as animal feed, compost and energy generation.

USDA reports that 90% of foodservice operations and households throw food away before it has truly spoiled. There have been new government studies asserting that “best by” and “use by” dates are not reliable indicators of whether a food item’s quality has been spoiled. Although these have been good rules of thumb to manage purchasing and inventory, you may want to explore this issue further to determine appropriate protocols.

Ronnei encourages the use of cycle menus to control ordering and allow for better forecasting. In addition, if you have extra food, there’s no reason you can’t add an item to the serving line that wasn’t promoted on the menu. She also emphasizes the purchase of items that have inherent recipe versatility.

There are many ways to menu a diced chicken product, for example.

TAKE THE CHALLENGE  In September 2015, the USDA and the EPA established the goal of reducing food loss and waste in the United States to 50% by 2030. USDA’s U.S. Food Waste Challenge calls on stakeholders across the entire food chain to join efforts to reduce and better manage food loss and waste in this country.

The purpose of the Challenge is for participants to share information about what they are doing to reduce, recover and/or recycle food loss and waste. Discovering what works in reducing food waste can be of great value to foodservice managers. The Challenge’s inventory of activities is a good place for schools to either disseminate information or find best practices for reducing food waste.

SCRAP  SNA’s sister organization, the School Nutrition Foundation (SNF), has partnered with EREF on a research project designed to help individual K-12 schools do their part in meeting USDA’s Challenge. The School Cafeteria Discards Assessment Project (SCrAP) aims to gather information regarding the quantity of waste generated in school cafeterias and obtain an understanding of how this waste is managed both at school and after it is hauled away. The goal is to use the findings to develop best practices that will help schools develop a food waste reduction plan.

“Our interest is in getting robust, credible and accurate data about what is coming out of school cafeterias,” says Staley. There are three levels for possible school participation. These range from a simple questionnaire about waste management practices to participation in a plate waste measurement activity. Visit www.erefdn.org/school-cafeteria-waste for details.

Tuscano Elementary School, in Phoenix, Ariz., recently participated in one of the plate waste measurement activities. School officials found SCrAP “intriguing,” because it helped them see how much food the kids were actually throwing away versus what is on the menu. “For example, one of the things that the cafeteria staff found is that on
the day they served Orange Chicken, there was less food waste than on the day they served sub sandwiches. They also found kindergarten students had a lot more plate waste than some of the older kids,” reports Courtney Baker, MHS, RD, of the Maricopa County Department of Public Health. “So, they are looking at how they can change things on their menu.

“We also wanted to find out what kind of milk the kids drank and after weighing the trash bins,” she continues. “We were surprised to learn it came out pretty even with all the flavors, which was not what we expected.”

As of late February, 120 schools had signed up for SCrAP at various levels; the project’s goal is to reach 400 sites. With new schools signing up every day, the project will continue through SY 2017-18.

FEELING INSPIRED? Ready to do your part? Start by assessing your current practices and procedures at your school nutrition operation. If you don’t have the resources to conduct plate waste research, you can still pay closer attention to the trash bins in the dining area and the kitchen. Get the team together to brainstorm ways to reduce the volume of waste, as well as explore opportunities for recycling and reuse.

You can take your environmental enthusiasm out of the kitchen, too. Share facts about the volume of food and other waste with friends, family and colleagues. Make sure you practice what you preach at home. Volunteer your time with local food rescue organizations. Support businesses with good food waste practices. Finally, engage your lawmakers at the local, state and national levels; tell them how important this issue is to you. SN

Doug Scott is a contributing editor to School Nutrition.

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