

The devastating effect of food waste and what we can do about it

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 *Latest in a series of posts on the environment* 

*Eli Zemsky is a sophomore at Moravian Academy. He presented a shorter version of this essay at the “Speak out!” Sustainability Forum, part of Touchstone Theatre’s **Festival UnBound 2020**, September 19. Eli’s interest in the environment was stirred by a cousin who was in Africa with the Peace Corps a few years ago, helping install wells and build up farms. He credits his focus on food to Amanda Little’s *The Fate of Food: What We’ll Eat in a Bigger, Hotter, Smarter World*, a book recommended by his Mom. View Eli reading the shorter version of this essay [here](#) at min. 49:58.*

Food Waste in Bethlehem

Elijah Zemsky

Food waste in our country has devastating lasting effects on the environment and on American communities. Our food supply chain pumps an extreme amount of unneeded food into homes and businesses, then completely mismanages the waste. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) estimates that up to 40% of the 40 million tons of food produced in America each year will be dumped into landfills. As a result, there is more food in our landfills than any other solid municipal waste. That means American homes, businesses, hospitals, and schools throw away more food than they do clothing, cans, plastic, or packaging.

Meanwhile, neighborhoods and families across the country cannot access the food they need. In the Lehigh Valley, about one in ten residents and one in three children rely on food banks and food pantries. When wheat is grown on a farm, made into bread, transported to a grocery store, and purchased all to be thrown in the trash, all it does is damage the environment. The EPA reports 20% of the water used in agriculture is completely wasted because of food loss.

Additionally, because food is thrown into piles with all the other waste in a landfill, it decomposes anaerobically. This means it doesn't have access to oxygen, so it undergoes a different chemical reaction when decomposing. This reaction produces large amounts of methane gas. Methane deals much more immediate damage to the atmosphere than CO₂; therefore, landfills pour massive amounts of potent greenhouse gases into the air largely because of food waste. The effect is amplified when garbage piles are covered. Possible solutions require more effort, time, and money than they seem they should, but it is vital for our planet and its citizens to pursue solutions to food waste.



In February of last year, the National Resource Defense Council published a report titled “Tackling Food Waste in Cities.” The report outlines what actions a city’s government and citizens should take to reduce food waste. In addition, the FDA, EPA, and USDA have recently created the Winning on Reducing Food Waste Initiative. Both the report and the federal agencies support local governments engaging with citizens and businesses. The EPA’s Food Recovery Hierarchy tells us the primary goal should be to reduce the food surplus in the first place. Obviously, it is dangerous to aim to eliminate all sources of extra food, so it is also important to develop plans for food rescue. The city council and mayor should implement a progressive plan to engage businesses.

To begin, the local government should make a clear commitment to reducing food waste by a defined amount, by a defined date. Next, there should be changes in the foodservice areas that are regulated by the city, like schools, and hospitals. These facilities should adopt regular food waste audits and food rescue plans. A waste audit involves picking a date to measure all the waste generated by a facility. Often, a waste audit includes discovering which specific items are thrown away. After finding which foods are often thrown away, a facility orders less of that item each month. It is impossible to predict exactly how much chicken or pasta or lettuce a cafeteria will need in a month. That is why the staff will also need to create a food rescue plan, often involving donations to food banks. Finally, the city should help businesses and households do the

same. The city council can promote the *Save the Food* and *Food: Too Good to Waste* materials. Schools can communicate with students and families about food waste and local efforts.

Many groups exist in the Lehigh Valley to help individuals and businesses address food waste. Not only do these serve as inspiration for potential strategies, but they could implement immediate wide-scale solutions if joined with the city. The nonprofit Lehigh Valley Community Foundation has already done significant work by organizing grants for food pantries, food banks, and soup kitchens. One of the largest such organizations in our community is the Community Action Committee of the Lehigh Valley (CACLV), sponsor of the Second Harvest Food Bank and other nonprofit agencies. CACLV provides aid in the form of food, shelter, advocacy, energy assistance, and small business assistance. They have an extensive food distribution network, serving over 60,000 people each month. There is also a Food Policy Council of the Lehigh Valley, devoted to organizing the funds, partnerships, and connections required to address food waste.

The NRDC points to cost-effectiveness and opportunity for change in support for helping businesses address food waste. If a business starts ordering less food each month, it will spend less money. Furthermore, efforts to reduce food waste in businesses like restaurants will result in lower labor and disposal costs. Research by The World Resources Institute shows that 99% of businesses had a positive return on investment when changing operating practices to reduce food waste. The average ROI was 14:1. Secondly, many businesses are interested in reducing food waste but don't know how or where to start. They are passionate about their community and environment. They're willing to make changes and form a large step in the food distribution chain. According to the NRDC, a local government can enact widespread change by tapping into that potential.

Our current world demands these reforms now more than ever. Amidst a global pandemic, social justice crises, and the threat of global warming, people are calling for change. Businesses nationwide have been forced to close. Families facing food insecurity have been devastated. However, communities have responded with resilience, compassion, and activism. Shelters, community centers, schools, and neighbors have selflessly

provided favors, programs, donations, and aid to those who need it. This is a mindset ripe for enacting change. Thus, we have a golden opportunity to develop sustainable practices that will rescue our current system of waste and neglect. Bethlehem and the Lehigh Valley have the community and the leadership to make changes, and we can't wait any longer.

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