



**INCPEN evidence to  
House of Commons Environment, Food & Rural Affairs (EFRA)  
Committee  
Food waste in England inquiry**

**Summary**

In the last few years food waste has attracted much attention but there has been more emphasis on dealing with it *after* it occurs and far too little on preventing it *before* it occurs.

Manufacturers and retailers can do more to prevent food waste provided they are able to choose from the widest possible types of packaging so they can tailor the packaging exactly to the product. But some proposed policies are restricting choice.

Only the companies involved have sufficient knowledge of the stresses and strains of the distribution chain – how high a product will be stacked, what temperatures it has to survive, whether it is vulnerable to pests or exposure to air, how long it needs to last – to be able to judge which pack is best for the job.

Restricting some types of packaging through calls for bans on some materials or favouring others such as recyclable materials, makes that job harder.

In addition, some NGOs, some waste companies and even some local authorities encourage consumers to avoid packaged goods, even if the food needs to be stored for some time before it is eaten.

INCPEN recommends that the Committee should call on government to recognise the important role that packaging plays in enabling food to be distributed safely from where it is produced to where it is consumed. And that government ensures that manufacturers and retailers are given sufficient flexibility to choose the best packaging both to protect the food and to make efficient use of resources.

**The impact of food waste**

Food waste is a huge environmental disaster. It wastes not just the food itself but all the resources – energy, water, materials, labour, time and money – that are invested in producing, packing, distributing and marketing it.

Globally more than enough food is produced today to feed the whole world's population. For different reasons in different countries food goes to waste.

Developing countries need better packaging and distribution systems to ensure food survives the significant stresses and strains of the journey from where it is produced to where it is consumed.

In developed countries one of the main reasons for waste is that people buy more food than they can eat, store it inadequately or buy 'loose' products that have too short a life.

INCPEN has carried out research for many years on how to improve the sustainability of the food supply system. A major two-year project assessed the [Environmental Impact of Packaging in the UK Food Supply systems](#). It showed the huge impact of demographics and lifestyles on our diet, including the impact of the growing number of one and two-person households.

[Table for One](#), for example, took data from the UK Government's National Food Survey and analysed the mass and energy used to provide one person with the food they consume. Data is presented by food type.

We published the findings of an assessment of the top 20+ food types that go to waste between retail depot and checkout in [Checking out Food Waste](#).

## Measures to prevent food waste

One of the most effective solutions to food waste is good packaging. On average, the resources used to make packaging protect ten times more resources in the food and other goods it protects. However, packaging is seldom mentioned in reports on food waste.

People expect food to be safe, fresh and wholesome when they receive it. They typically take for granted the role that packaging plays in enabling it to be delivered in good condition. Some stakeholders advise people to avoid packaged goods. This actually leads to more food waste. Unpackaged produce, if not consumed within a short period of time, ends up as waste.

An unwrapped cucumber loses so much water within three days that it becomes dull and is unsaleable. A thin plastic wrap extends its life for up to 14 days. Loose new potatoes turn green after a few hours under lights. In an opaque bag they last for days. Bananas packed in sealed bags last far longer than loose ones.

Other environmental issues sometimes conflict with ensuring a long life for food. Glass and metal packaging typically extends the life of food for years but campaigners' calls to reduce packaging have led some companies to shift to lighter weight packaging. Long life is becoming even more important because climate change is making crop harvesting more unpredictable and bottled water and packaged foods are essential in disaster areas caused by droughts and floods.

Similarly some campaigners call for packaging to be made of single materials to enable them to be recycled more easily. Globally, current policy is in danger of restricting innovation because higher and higher recycling targets are being set. This pushes the market towards materials that are easiest to recycle, even when they are not the most resource-efficient.

Some of the most resource-efficient packs are those made with tiny amounts of different materials – often not worth recycling in themselves. But they protect the product using fewer resources, they require fewer trucks to distribute and often they generate less residual waste than recyclable packs, even when those are recycled at high levels.

In the UK, foods such as fresh olives and ready meals are typically sold in PET containers because manufacturers have been encouraged to use easily recyclable materials but PET has little barrier to oxygen. The products therefore have to be kept under chilled conditions, which has its own environmental impact, and even then they have a shelf life of only a few weeks.

In contrast, in most other European countries these foods are typically sold in laminate PP/EVOH/PP containers – which provides a good barrier to oxygen. They can be stored at ambient temperature and have a shelf life of months.

Laminate structures can technically be recycled but it is seldom worth spending energy to do so. In any case, the benefit of avoiding the environmental impact of refrigeration, more than offsets the impact of the small amount of used packaging generated.

## **Trends in shopping and consumption and their impact on food waste**

There are a number of current trends that are likely to help prevent food waste:

- More people are shopping more often for fewer items. This reduces the likelihood that food will be bought on a whim - rather than for a specific meal
- There is a wider range of portion sizes available so people living alone, or eating alone, can buy the right amount (small portions use more packaging but less food is wasted)
- Some restaurants use smaller plates and serve smaller portions; some offer doggy bags
- Many retailers are offering advice on how to use left-overs and making 'ugly' fruit and vegetables available; 'eat one, keep one' split packs are available
- Brands and retailers are using fewer 'best before' dates and advising that food can be frozen at any time up to the 'use by' date.

## **INCPEN campaigns to prevent food waste**

INCPEN has run a number of campaigns against food waste. [Reduce Waste: Buy Packaged](#) includes a short video [The Good the Bad and the Spudly](#) that has been viewed by over 5,000 people.

We worked with Kent Resource Partnership, WRAP, the Food & Drink Federation, The Packaging Federation and the British Retail Consortium on a consumer information project [Fresher for Longer](#) which shows how packaging helps to keep food fresher for longer at home.

Since the late 1990s we have produced 5 editions of a recipe booklet that explains how people can shop, store and prepare food in an energy-efficient, environmentally-responsible way. [The Green Kitchen: Recipes for a Better Planet](#). Over one million copies have been distributed, mainly by local authorities, who can apply to INCPEN for them free of charge.

## **INCPEN**

INCPEN – the Industry Council for research on Packaging & the Environment - is a group of manufacturers and retailers from every stage in the supply chain who carry out research to understand the environmental and social effects of packaging and work together to promote responsible packaging for sustainable supply chains.

It was established in 1974 by companies who knew that packaging plays an essential role in keeping food and other products safe on the journey from field to fork. Its [research](#) has consistently demonstrated that packaging has a net positive environmental impact.

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