

A Land of Plenty Wasted

STORY BY BRIAN BUTTON

Mention landfills and most people envision diapers or plastic bags, but here's some food for thought—think about what didn't go into our mouths, because in Iowa landfills—food waste takes the cake.

You better cut the pizza in four pieces because I'm not hungry enough to eat six."
—Baseball's Yogi Berra

"Food waste continues to be the single largest landfilled item by weight," says Tom Anderson with the DNR's solid waste section. "It continues to grow. It is sad in some ways. Food gets thrown away everyday. People may not understand how much money they spend on food they will throw away," he says. Yet it isn't just homes. Grocery and convenience stores throw away produce, baked goods, dairy, fish, meat and deli items. School and hospital cafeterias, restaurants, cafes and offices also create partially eaten food. Their kitchens make waste, too.

This isn't guesswork. Every five years, Iowa's landfill waste is studied. Armed with knowledge, towns and cities can educate people and create programs to prevent less from reaching landfills through waste reduction, recovery, recycling and composting. The DNR helps fund these efforts. Studies also give clues to Iowa's recycling rates. And if you think studies are done by professionals eyeing, sifting,

weighing and recording findings by picking through waste at 10 landfills across the state large and small, urban and rural—you are correct.

The findings are astonishing. *Twenty percent* of all landfill materials is food waste. Most of it is loose food items from food processing, storage, preparation, cooking and leftovers and scraps. Almost 7 percent of it is food still in its original packaging—canned and boxed foods, canned and bottled drinks, bags of frozen foods directly off store shelves, home cupboards and freezers. Food totally wasted.

The second largest item, "plastic film," makes up 8.6 percent of landfill material. These are garbage and shopping bags, shrink wrap for packaging and plastic sheeting wrapped around pallets and more. "There are no real good diversion programs available. Some stores accept bags for recycling, but they can't go into recycling bins because they cause machines to bind," says Anderson. (A reusable cloth grocery bag lessens those issues, folks.)

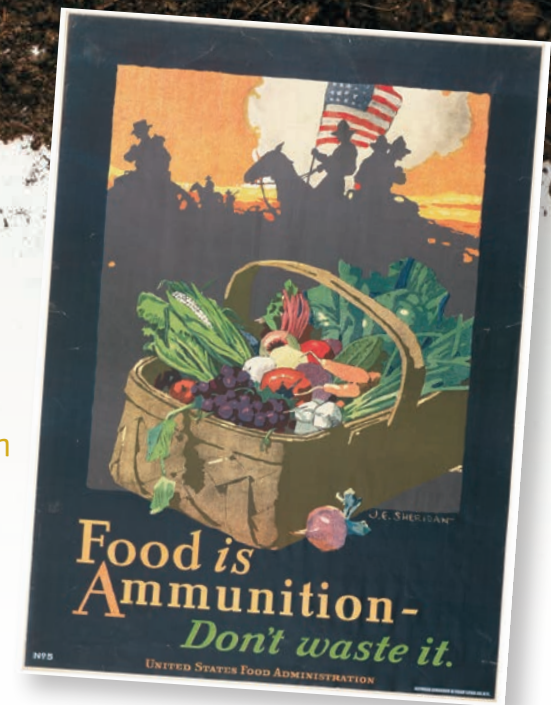
Third, compostable paper, makes up 7.6 percent of waste. These low-grade paper items could be composted—paper towels and plates, napkins, tissues and food-contaminated recyclable paper. Iowa's fourth most landfilled item is mixed recyclable paper at 6 percent—manila folders and envelopes, notebook paper, junk mail, phone directories, catalogs and books. Rounding out the top five is cardboard and kraft paper—corrugated boxes, cartons and paper bags from groceries, department stores and fast food bags.

"Cardboard is going to be the interesting one," says Anderson about a new waste study that begins this summer. "With the rise of Amazon and online shopping are those cardboard boxes being recycled or landfilled?"

When items could be composted versus landfilled, it could be done large-scale, like yard waste is by municipalities, or done at home. Either way, it rids tonnages from landfills where it takes up valuable space. Instead, it could create new soil.

Why so Much Food Waste?

A lot of waste stems from food label confusion. "Label dates are often misinterpreted," says Anderson. With the exception of baby formula, all product labels are simply manufacturer's estimates of peak freshness, he says. Those "sell by," "use by," "best by" and "expiration" dates have "nothing to do whether food is safe to eat. Label confusion is a big reason for so much waste," he says. This leads to premature discarding of tasty, safe food. And if you routinely have leftovers, modify your cooking and serving portions. Buy what you need. Eat what you bought to avoid spoilage and expensive waste. In the refrigerator,



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Feed armies and navies—not landfills. That was the mantra during the first and second world wars when virtually every item and thing imaginable had value to support war efforts. In 1917, under direction of newly appointed food “czar” with the United States Food Administration, Iowa’s Herbert Hoover admonished waste. All that food wasted by people at home could be re-directed to U.S. allies in Europe and American forces fighting overseas. Hoover later became America’s 31st president from 1929 to 1933. Today, 20 percent of Iowa’s total landfill waste is food. Despite this, more than 450,000 Iowans are food insecure. Working to reduce waste and put it to good helps saves resources, extends landfill life, reduces emissions and feeds people.



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put leftovers in front where visible for quick use and not forgotten until they go bad.

With food waste, “It’s not just that apple, salad or milk discarded, but resources to grow that food,” he says—water and energy to pump for irrigation, fertilizers, energy to plant, weed, harvest, clean, process and ship and refrigerate storage, then truck to warehouses and stores. With food waste, that energy, effort and resources are also thrown away.

We Aren’t Helpless—Fighting Waste

In 2019, the DNR launched popular grants to fight food waste. Part works with restaurants. More focuses on food banks and pantries to help them accept perishable food with cold storage and dry goods shelving. “The bottom line is to expand food recovery to get food to people,” says Anderson. When Covid hit, food was no longer delivered to schools and restaurants. They were closed. Instead of creating waste, “we provided cold storage to food banks and pantries to recover food.” Grants required Energy Star rated freezers and walk-in coolers. Funds went fast. The DNR is now on the third grant round with 89 projects funded so far.

“It’s been quite popular, well-received and desperately

needed to serve more varieties of food—fruits, vegetables, proteins, milk, eggs—all of which requires cold storage to help those in need,” says Anderson.

Iowa City launched curbside waste food collection in 2017. Put into the same containers for yard waste, it is all composted, not landfilled. All those coffee grounds, leftovers, eggshells, meat, bones, pizza boxes and fruit and vegetable peels now make rich soil to save landfill space.

The Cedar Rapids/Linn County Solid Waste Agency worked with Walmart and Sam’s Club to handle unsold produce and other food for composting. It cut their landfill waste *in half*.

Luther and Simpson Colleges and the University of Iowa installed food pulpers to capture waste food for composting. With DNR funds, these glorified waterless garbage disposals break food into small pieces for fast composting. In one year, Luther College pulped *55 tons* to compost on site—cutting landfilled food waste *in half*. Iowa State University went to tray-less cafeterias. Instead of students loading up trays only to eat half, they are given plates. They can come back for more, but waste is less.

And what about disposable diapers? They are 3.5 percent of landfill waste—nearly six times less than food. 🍌



With 20 percent of landfilled items in Iowa being food waste, 7 percent of that is still in its original packaging—canned and boxed foods, canned and bottled drinks, bags of frozen foods directly off store shelves, home cupboards and freezers. Sadly, much of it could have gone to food banks instead.

Digging into Waste

Garbage Gold Mine

Each year, more than 495,300 tons of recyclable materials are landfilled in Iowa with an estimated value of \$60.3 million. Diverting landfill waste increases revenue, creates jobs and cuts greenhouse gasses. Nearly 70 percent of Iowa solid waste is divertible via reuse, recycling and composting. A third of it could be composted instead.

Sorting, processing and re-manufacturing recyclable materials creates 10 time more jobs than landfilling. It could create nearly 6,000 new jobs. Food waste collection, processing and composting could support 800 jobs. These jobs could spur local economies and give state and local governments more revenues and more economic growth versus the solid waste and recycling industry.

GREENHOUSE GAS IMPACTS

Landfilling recyclable materials prevents them from being reused or manufactured into new products. Using these materials in manufacturing of new products and materials means energy and emission savings versus use of virgin materials.

The estimated energy and emissions impact of disposing more than 854,000 tons of recyclable paper, containers and compostable materials in Iowa is immense. If recycled or composted, more than 1.4 million metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalent emissions could be reduced. That’s like removing emissions of 303,000 passenger vehicles each year or conserving nearly 162 million gallons of gasoline or not burning more than 7,700 railcars of coal.



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You Can Take a Bite Out of Food Waste

Iowans send more than 190,000 tons of unopened, untouched food to landfills—enough to fill a line of dump trucks from Cedar Rapids to Waterloo.

Of landfilled items, 20 percent—568,197 tons—is food waste. The average Iowan wastes 30 pounds of food monthly, while one in eight Iowans is considered “food insecure.”

By reducing food waste, you save on groceries—up to \$2,000 a year. It keeps food from taking landfill space and conserves resources needed to grow, process, transport and sell food.

Buy only what you need.

Unless it’s a staple you can eat or store long-term, avoid overstocking because it’s on sale. Some stores sell misshapen, slightly bruised or otherwise “ugly” produce at discount—perfect to save money for cooking and baking. Consider donating the rest to a local food pantry.

Save: Plan ahead.

Make a list and stick to it to avoid impulse purchases that go unused. Check the fridge to use what’s there before wasting money on more.

Get creative with leftovers.

Find recipes to give leftovers new life, like making soup, or leftover meat and veggies for pizza, soup or stir fry. Freeze leftovers in single portions for a quick meal.

Cut clutter.

Avoid “mystery leftovers” covered in fuzz at the back of the fridge by being organized. Keep leftovers labeled by contents and date. Rotate oldest food to the front to use first.

Cleaning your plate.

Only take what you’ll eat. Start with small servings and go for more if still hungry rather than taking too much.

Learn how to freeze and preserve.

Sure, lasagna was great the first three nights, but if you’ve had



enough, save the rest. Learn best techniques for freezing and labeling containers.

Take it to go.

Don’t waste food when dining out—ask for a to-go box for one less meal to prepare at home. You paid for it.

Compost what’s left.

Sometimes, things just mold before we expect. Or you have cores and peels. Consider composting at home. Learn more at iowadnr.gov.

Recycle right.

All plastics may not be recyclable at your location. Adding non-acceptable items contaminates the recycling waste stream, which is hugely expensive and time consuming for recycling facilities. If recyclables are too contaminated, they get landfilled. Check with your city hall or solid waste agency online to see what types of materials, paper, plastics are accepted locally. It varies across the state.

