
Food waste a serious environmental problem

JOSH FRYDENBERG THE AUSTRALIAN 12:00AM April 12, 2017

In the environment and energy portfolio, issues such as the gas crisis, South Australia's blackout and bleaching events across the Great Barrier Reef have grabbed the headlines.

Another environmental issue that may not be as prominent but is vitally important is food waste.

Consumers waste 20 per cent of the food they buy, which sees more than 4 million tonnes end up in landfill each year and costs the Australian economy about \$20 billion a year.

In Victoria alone, the equivalent of 156 Olympic size swimming pools are filled by household food waste.

Commercial and industrial food waste is also costly, making up more than half of the \$20bn annual cost.

It is simply remarkable that in prosperous, modern-day Australia we produce enough food to feed 60 million people a year but every month more than 600,000 people — one-third of them children — seek food relief from relevant charities.

It is not a problem confined to Australia, with the Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations estimating that one-third or 1.3 billion tonnes of food, worth \$1 trillion, is wasted each year.

Food waste in the developed world nearly equals annual food production in sub-Saharan Africa.

Just think of the economic, environmental and social benefits that would flow if we did not waste so much food.

On a global scale it would mean saving 250 million megalitres of fresh water (450 Sydney Harbours), 28 per cent of arable land and preventing more than three billion tonnes of greenhouse gases entering the atmosphere.

In fact, were the total carbon dioxide emissions from food waste to be treated as a country, it would come in third behind China and the US.

This is why the Turnbull government is committed to developing a National Food Waste Strategy to halve food waste by 2030.

But the federal government cannot do this alone. Rather, it must be a combined effort across industry, the not-for-profit sector and academia, with the active buy-in of state and local governments.

Today's round table, which is co-hosted by the Pratt Foundation, is an important first step. It brings together peak bodies such as the National Farmers' Federation and Food and Grocery Council, academic experts from the CSIRO, Monash and Melbourne universities, RMIT and the University of Technology Sydney, our largest supermarket and food chains — including Coles, Woolworths and Nestle — and food relief and rescue groups such as SecondBite, FoodBank, FareShare, OzHarvest and Yume.

With so many committed participants, it is a unique opportunity to develop a plan.

We need real improvements along the supply chain, from paddock to plate.

For example, new plant varieties and cropping techniques can assist farmers by extending the life of their product and reduce the amount lost in harvesting.

Better packaging designs, stock rotation and storage facilities can deliver benefits.

Innovation in food-related technology has a role to play, with various apps and technology trialled in Britain having potential here. These include a "leftover label" that transforms its colour to signify how much longer the food will last, or the food-sharing app OLIO, which puts people with leftovers in contact with others who live in the vicinity to share.

Here in Australia food rescue organisations are already doing incredible work. At the last election, the Turnbull government committed \$1.2 million to assist various food rescue charities to reduce their energy costs by installing solar, batteries and energy-efficient refrigeration. We will continue to do more.

At one end of the spectrum you have FareShare in Victoria, which deploys an army of 800 volunteers to cook 25,000 free meals a week. This surplus food is sourced from farmers, supermarkets and business.

At the other end is Yume, which provides an online platform for food suppliers to sell surplus food. It's bought by other commercial operators or given to food charities like OzHarvest, FoodBank and SecondBite. Products are white-labelled to protect their brand. A range of philanthropic organisations have invested in this innovative business model, which seeks to simultaneously achieve positive commercial and community results.

With 97 per cent of all food waste going to landfill, the Australian government is also using the Emissions Reduction Fund to assist projects that seek to separate organic waste from landfill. We have supported nine such projects. By diverting food waste to compost, the methane emissions can be reduced significantly while also improving agriculture by preventing soil carbon loss.

Everyone at today's food waste round table recognises that the government's food waste reduction target is ambitious but achievable. We must develop a co-ordinated national strategy for the National Food Waste Summit later this year.

Josh Frydenberg is Minister for Environment and Energy.

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