

Transcript – Ways & Means S8E6 The Tiny Packaging Tweak That Could Help the Planet

Lauren Rosenthal: From the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University, this is Ways and Means. I'm Lauren Rosenthal.

Bella Larson: So, can you tell me what item you just picked up and find the expiration label on it?

Lauren Rosenthal: We sent Duke student Bella Larson to a grocery store on a fall afternoon to check in with shoppers and ask about what was in their carts.

Speaker 1: A rotisserie chicken. And I was looking because it was actually packed. It wasn't an expiration date. It was packed at 9:41 this morning.

Bella Larson: Wow. Okay, so what do you think that label means?

Speaker 1: That label means I wish there was a fresher chicken in there! (chuckling)

Lauren Rosenthal: Food date labels – those stickers with expiration dates and “best by” stamps – can be really confusing and that can cause us to throw away perfectly good food. It's bad for our wallets, of course. But that's not all. Americans waste tons of food each year – literally. Billions of tons. In fact, a third of the food produced in the US never makes it to our dinner plates. Wasted food is a big, expensive problem in this country. Most of it ends up in landfills. And as that food rots away -- it's just one more thing contributing to a changing climate.

(Theme music)

Lauren Rosenthal: In this episode of Ways & Means: Kicking America's multi-billion-dollar food waste habit. How tons of wasted food are making climate change worse. And how one simple switch – to better date labels on our food – just might help make a dent in the problem. This episode is part of our ongoing series, Climate Change Solutions.

Kate Brownstein: Welcome to my kitchen ...

Lauren Rosenthal: We asked a bunch of Duke students to poke around their pantries and report back to us on the date labels they found on their food.

Damla Ozdemir: I'm standing in front of my mini fridge and my pantry closet in my college dorm room. I'm going to start looking through here and see what I have.

Kate Brownstein: Oh, “Best by July 2022.” So, this is actually expired, which kind of impressive. I feel like beans in a can don't really go bad.

Kelly Torres: I am taking out a Lance Toastie peanut butter sandwich cracker. It says “Best if Used By” ... March 2028?! I feel like peanut butter cannot go that long.

Damla Ozdemir: Oh, yeah, I have a stick of smokehouse cheddar in here for those midnight cravings. Wow, Oh, my God. Yeah, it says expiration date, and it's a month ago. Expiration a month ago. Not good.

Lauren Rosenthal: In addition to lots of expired food, there was also a lot of confusion over these labels themselves – what they said, and what they actually mean.

Damla Ozdemir: Yeah. So, I assume “Best By” is like freshness. I've never really understood these.

Kelly Brownstein: (Package crinkling) Ummm... so I'm not sure what the difference is between “Best if Used By” and “Expired by.”

Maddie McCorkle: So, this says “B-B” And so I'm assuming that it means best by, but I've never seen that before.

Parker Davis: it's funny that there isn't a sell by date because they could put one on there, and I think I would still follow that almost religiously.

Kate Brownstein: I think the expiration dates are telling me a lot more about how long they've been in my pantry and how little they're used.

Damla Ozdemir: It's kind of confusing. At what point is the “Best By” dangerous or does it ever get dangerous? If something does get toxic, do they need to put an expiration date on it or do they sort of assume that you're not going to go too much past the best by date? I do not have answers to any of those questions.

Lauren Rosenthal: One person who might have answers to these questions is a man named Norbert Wilson.

(Music)

Norbert Wilson: I am trained as an agricultural and applied economist.

Lauren Rosenthal: Norbert Wilson leads the World Food Policy Center at the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke. Among other things, he studies food waste, and date labels – the kind of

labels shoppers find on the back of a box or can. Before he began studying them, Norbert says his own family's approach to interpreting those labels wasn't particularly scientific.

Norbert Wilson: "Well, it says use by and we're almost at that date or we just passed it. We need to throw it out." We didn't even question. We just said, "Well, it must mean it's going to make us sick."

Lauren Rosenthal: Norbert got interested in food date labels in a roundabout way. He is curious about food security, especially for low-income people. It bothered him that billions of pounds of food were being wasted in a country where some children still go hungry. Lots of organizations that give food away for free, like food banks and food pantries, are religious institutions – and that interests Norbert – he works at Duke's school of public policy and the Duke Divinity School. He began to notice that these religious institutions sometimes get products to distribute because of mistakes.

Norbert Wilson: It can be sometimes products that are damaged. The labeling could have been misprinted or whatever. And so, grocery stores couldn't sell those products.

Lauren Rosenthal: And that's in addition to just the regular kind of shelf-clearing that stores do.

Norbert Wilson: We've seen examples of grocery stores threw out a product that was close to the expiration date.

Lauren Rosenthal: All this was swirling around in his head when he went to a conference, and he heard a presentation by these two researchers.

Norbert Wilson: And they were looking at date labels, "Best By" "Use by" and their work was showing that there isn't a consistent - there isn't a federal law about those date labels except for infant formula. But that states have just very wildly different laws about what the date labels ought to be. It was one of the few times I went to a conference, and I saw someone giving a presentation. I thought, I can do something with that.

Roni Neff: So, we are throwing out a ridiculous amount of food because of the lack of clarity on our date labels.

Lauren Rosenthal: This is Roni Neff, one of the researchers Norbert heard at that conference.

Roni Neff: So, we did a study a few years ago and we asked people, do you think that food date labels are federally regulated? And over a third of participants thought that they were, and another quarter were unsure.

Lauren Rosenthal: And Roni's research confirmed that people are taking action — based on food labels. And where they thought the labels were coming from.

Roni Neff: the people who thought that the food date labels were federally regulated were much more likely to throw out food as a result because they thought that the labels meant something, and they don't.

Lauren Rosenthal: What Roni means is that there is no federal agency overseeing these labels. It's up to manufacturers to choose the wording on these labels that works best for them. Some states do regulate what date labels say — but those requirements vary a lot from state to state, creating a confusing patchwork of laws.

(Music)

Lauren Rosenthal: The national non-profit group ReFED has estimated the impact of the convoluted labeling situation. Roni has reviewed their numbers.

Roni Neff: They estimate about 7% of the food that's discarded in the United States is because of the lack of clear date labeling that we have.

Lauren Rosenthal: The dates and labels we're using - it's all over the map. Some labels actually refer to food safety. But others are really more about flavor. Norbert Wilson says he's found that in his own experience.

Norbert Wilson: And to be honest, I've started some experiments where I tried some products beyond the date. My, my favorite was, um, when I was, uh, traveling, I remember buying yogurt, and I think I let it sit for a month before opening it. I'm not encouraging other people to do this, but it was fine.

Lauren Rosenthal: In that case, misleading labels may not seem like such a big deal. Yet these labels are part of a bigger problem — our country's big, multi-billion-dollar problem with food waste.

(Music)

Norbert Wilson: Some of the experiments I run, you'll see people say they'll waste anywhere between 20 to 50% of the product that they would buy.

Lauren Rosenthal: I'm going to repeat that for you — because it's a big deal. Norbert's experiments show people waste 20-50% of all the food they buy. Sending as much as half of what they purchase straight to the landfill.

Norbert's findings are not atypical. On average, Americans waste about a third of all the food they buy.

Norbert says when he talks to people about how much food gets thrown away in this country, reactions vary – widely. Some people are shocked, and some don't seem to care.

Norbert Wilson: And I think the reason why there's sometimes both the shock and the dismissal of that number is the fact that we don't really see it. We don't look at our own kitchen, think I'm really throwing away 50%.

Norbert Wilson: it's one of those problems that exists, and it happens just below the surface. It happens to all of us. And it's easy to discount it, to ignore it because it just happens.

Lauren Rosenthal: All of that food that's getting thrown away – it took resources just to get on a store shelf in the first place – it had to be harvested or manufactured, packaged, and shipped to us – each of those steps burns fuel.

And then, once it's thrown away, most of that wasted food ends up in a landfill. In fact, food waste takes up about a quarter of all landfill space in the U.S. And as that discarded food decomposes in the landfill, it emits methane – a potent greenhouse gas that contributes to climate change.

It's becoming more and more urgent that we stop wasting so much food. The United Nations has this thing called the Sustainable Development Goals. It's an effort to map out how we can make life on Earth sustainable. Those goals call for reducing food waste 50% by 2045. That's one of a lot of changes we need to make to stabilize the earth's climate.

According to an International Governmental Panel on Climate Change, up to a tenth of all global greenhouse gas emissions that are caused by humans are coming from wasted food.

Norbert Wilson: So, I think it's really critical for us as consumers, as people who are thinking about policy spaces, to say, "Where are the ways that we can actually reduce this challenge?"

(Music)

Lauren Rosenthal: And here's where we get back to labels. As the students from Duke found, there are a ton of labels out there, saying lots of different things and no standardization.

Norbert Wilson: So “Best By,” “Use By,” “Sell By,” “Expires On” or “Expires By,” “Freshest By,” you can see all sorts of labels.

Lauren Rosenthal: Norbert found that in Alabama, for example, the state approved approximately 20 different kinds of food labels for products. Even for the same type of product! Take two cans of stewed tomatoes. One might say “sell by this date.” Another might say “best if used by.”

Norbert Wilson: In one of the papers, I published I went to grocery stores, and you can see for the same basic product, different date labels. I didn't know that until starting to look at this. So, this has been the move and actually the bill in Congress or that has been in Congress offered by Chellie Pingree, um, was to do that at the federal level.

Chellie Pingree YouTube Video: OK, we’re going to talk about a very common problem that people experience when they open the refrigerator or go to the cupboard...and they look at the label and they say, “Uh, gosh, should I eat this? It says best if used by.... (fades)”

Lauren Rosenthal: This is Chellie Pingree, she’s a Democratic Congresswoman from Maine...in May of 2023, she teamed up with Dan Newhouse, a Republican from Washington State, and U.S. Senator Richard Blumenthal a Democrat from Connecticut, among others, to introduce the Food Date Labeling Act.

Chellie Pingree YouTube Video: So, I’ve got a bill for this, we’re going to have a labelling system that’s very specific for people – it will say “Best if Used By,” which means it’s probably best if you eat it by April 15, but it’s not an issue. And the other label will say “Use By.”

Lauren Rosenthal: Representative Pingree’s voice you just heard was from a YouTube video meant to educate the public. We called her up to talk. She says she’s recently started to understand the true importance of wasted food.

Chellie Pingree: You know, when I first heard about this several years ago, I thought, oh, yeah, that's nice. Nobody should waste food. Of course. Everybody's grandmother told them that. But when I started to understand that 30% of the food is wasted in this country, that it's an incredible cost, that we have so many people going hungry. At the same time, we're wasting food. And then to understand that most food ends up in a landfill, turns into methane gas, and just contributes to the climate change program. I realize this is a very serious issue that has to be tackled on all fronts.

Lauren Rosenthal: And she says the lack of mandatory, federal guidelines for food labels is a big part of the solution.

Chellie Pingree: Yeah, I mean, I've seen estimates. I don't have anything, you know, highly scientific, but I've seen estimates that say if food waste were a country [CJ4], it would be the third to fifth largest offender of carbon pollution in the world. So that kind of puts it in perspective. It is a massive problem.

Lauren Rosenthal: Representative Pingree said she's hopeful about the potential of this legislation to pass. –It does have bipartisan support. And the current system is just not working.

Chellie Pingree: Right now, what we have is often a hodgepodge of legislation that goes state by state. And we've heard from a lot of manufacturers that that's almost worse. It's good to get state legislators paying attention to this. But the fact is then you've got, you know, one label goes in one state and one in another state, and I think that is helping to push us towards the finish line of manufacturers understanding, oh, well, this is just getting way too confusing for us. Let's have one standard. It's a federal standard and we move forward on that.

Lauren Rosenthal: For her the situation is especially upsetting. She owns a small farm on an island community off the coast of Maine and she knows what it takes to produce food. She says farmers have to be sensitive to the life cycle of the land.

Chellie Pingree: a certified organic farmer. I've been farming on and off for much of my life. In a small farm, small and medium sized farm with livestock. You generally think in a very circular way, you harvest what you can, you sell or donate whatever you can. All of the unused material from harvesting goes into a composting bin, along with animal manure, along with, we run a small restaurant, so food scraps there. We do all that and eventually that composted material comes back to the land. So, if you think about it in a circular economy or a small farm, you are already doing exactly what needs to be done.

Lauren Rosenthal: But the world has become more complicated – we often don't eat local food, we have supply chains and have to worry about shelf life, and other considerations.

Chellie Pingree: We've created a horrible problem in this country and gotten so far away from just a circular economy.

Lauren Rosenthal: And so, she and her colleagues launched The Food Date Labeling Act. The bill has yet to make it out of committee.

Roni Neff: So, in an ideal world, first of all, we need to get that policy passed.

Lauren Rosenthal: That's Roni Neff again, from Johns Hopkins. She says passing this legislation is important, but historically has been weirdly daunting.

Roni Neff: I will say that this, this same or very similar bills have been put forward over and over and over again. And they've often been bipartisan, and they haven't passed.

Lauren Rosenthal: *Roni says bills like this often don't pass because other issues – ones that are perceived as bigger problems - take priority. But with a rapidly changing climate, the time might be right for policies to finally change.*

(Music)

Lauren Rosenthal: Duke professor Norbert Wilson and his colleagues conducted research to see what solutions could help us reduce food waste—and of those, which ones the public would get behind.

Norbert Wilson: So, we looked at nine different solutions. That, um, they included tax, education, standardizing date labels, making donations easier, composting.... (fades)

Lauren Rosenthal: *Researchers looked at all of these different ways to reduce food waste. They found that two potential solutions stood out as ones people are probably going to rally around.*

Norbert Wilson: We ran a survey, a nationally representative survey, and we asked people -- we divided the sample and asked them, you know, which of these food waste reducing methods do you think wouldn't work? And we asked the different half, you know, which ones do you think would be effective at reducing food waste and loss? And we saw that people really rallied around things like standardizing date labels, reducing, um, confusion around standardizing date levels excuse me, and making donations easier.

Lauren Rosenthal: Specifically for grocery stores and markets, they can donate food that's close to its expiration date. And standardizing date labels? That means that the words on the back of a can or box mean the same thing, wherever you are. No one step will be enough to fix food waste, Norbert says. We have to think of our food system as a whole, and there are a lot of tweaks we could make to reduce waste in it. But common-sense, easy-to-understand food date labels? That could be a solid place to start – and something both Republicans and Democrats should be able to get behind. Especially now as we are grappling with climate change. Here's Roni Neff.

Roni Neff: One of the reasons I love working on food waste is that almost everybody can get behind it like it's whether you're left or right. Like, nobody likes waste, and it bothers

almost everybody. This idea that we're throwing out food we didn't need to. And so that is, you know, we don't have very many issues in this country where we can put together bipartisan coalitions. So, if this is one like, how terrific is that?

(Outro music)

Lauren Rosenthal: We'll have a link to the World Food Policy Center at Duke University and to some of Roni Neff's work. That's at our website, ways-and-means-show-dot-org. We'll also include a link to an article on tips for home cooks on reducing food waste – that's ways-and-means-show-dot-org. Also: The World Food Policy Center has a podcast called the Leading Voices in Food and a longer interview with Roni Neff. That conversation is hosted by Norbert Wilson.

Lauren Rosenthal: Ways & Means is produced by Carol Jackson and Alison Jones. Thanks to all of the students in Alison Jones' Introduction to Podcasting class which is offered by the DeWitt Wallace Center for Media and Democracy here at Duke, including the students you heard reporting in this episode:

- Bella Larsen
- Damla Ozdemir
- Kate Brownstein
- Kelly Torres
- Maddie McCorkle
- And Parker Davis

And that podcasting class was in the fall of 2022, so many of those students are now Duke alumni, congratulations to them! Thanks as well to Hannah Otos, Kirsten Khire and Duke students Akshay Gokul and Joy Liu. Our engineer is Johnny Vince Evans. And I'm your host, Lauren Rosenthal. Thanks so much for listening.

Announcer: Season 8 of Ways & Means is made possible thanks to support from the Office of the Provost at Duke University.

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