

A Taxing Proposition that Bites

by / Paul van der Werf



The New Year brought the usual trail of resolutions whose resolve is severely tested and usually melted by the time we hit Shrove Tuesday. A common resolution is to eat less and exercise more. Another common resolution is to manage our money better. Latte economics would have it that avoiding that daily \$5 drink would keep a lot more of our money in our pockets. A cool hybrid resolution would be to eat better and throw out less. It could save each of us at least \$10/week.

There are many culprits when it comes to throwing out food. Ultimately the key responsibility is personal through buying too much, not knowing how to cook, and hating leftovers. However, we can look upstream behind the happy facades of food retailers and see (and often not see) a lot of food being wasted.

The practice of food retailers wasting food is so institutionalized that most don't even realize it. It is largely done under the auspices of public health but this thinking is so warped it appears retailers think cosmetic issues with food can be fit under that umbrella as well. Just last week I was trolling around the produce section at a grocery store in Saskatoon (part of my resolution to eat better) and saw the produce man pulling shiny apples off the display pile and into a garbage box and replacing them with new shiny apples.

The Zero Waste Council recently came out with a study titled, "Tax Incentive Options for Charitable Food Donations:

Making the Business Case," and have been advocating that food retailers get an (additional) tax break to donate leftover edible food to various charities. It should be pointed out that they already get a tax break for their donations. However, a key argument made is that businesses, "often pay more to donate food than to throw it out" and on that basis need some additional tax relief. Their argument serves to highlight a significant food retailing structural issue that somehow there is choice between feeding hungry people and throwing food into a landfill to feed hungry bacteria. A second issue is that, on this basis, food retailers have created two classes of food: one they can sell to fortunate citizens, and a second class they can feed to hungry people or hungry bacteria. It raises the significant ethical question, do hungry people deserve to be fed second-class food? As it stands now, the only thing missing is a program whereby food retailers send leftover food home with their employees to be fed to their pets.

I don't know how the Council got hoodwinked and co-opted by food retailers (I presume) into developing and promoting this idea. By definition zero waste is "a philosophy that encourages the redesign of resource life cycles so that all products are reused." For food products to meet this ethos it is clear significant work is required. Firstly, a re-design of food retailing is required so it better matches the food it sells with customer demands. Secondly, consumer food appearance expectations

need to be dialed down from the idealistic (not to mention unsustainable and unrealistic) way food is currently sold. It's straight out of Disney. Thirdly, best before date labelling needs a tear down and rebuild so it applies only to relevant products and is understandable by consumers. All this additional tax incentive does is allow food retailers to perpetuate their bad habits and get paid to do it.

As consumers we already pay for both food disposal and donation. All that tax relief for food retailers would accomplish is to make consumers pay twice: once for donating the food and then again to make up the tax shortfall.

Somehow it needs to become unacceptable for edible food to be directed to the garbage (not to mention composting). That unacceptability, if not taken up voluntarily, may need to work its way into regulation. That's much more in line with zero waste and as well as being in the spirit of "you are your brother's keeper." It would force a change in the food retailer's bottom line so the stupid choice between landfilling food and using it to fill an empty (human) stomach do not have to be made. Is it too much to ask for a little more stick and a little less carrot? ●●

Paul is the owner of the environmental consultancy 2cg. He is also a PhD candidate at Western University and developing strategies to prevent food from becoming food waste.

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Paul van der Werf, M.Sc.

519-645-7733

paulv@2cg.ca

Twitter: @2cg_

2cg.ca

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