

The Opportunities and Challenges of Food Recovery

Discussion Paper for the Table Community Food Centre's Board of Directors

By Ramsey Hart, Executive Director

November 2019

Food recovery or food rescue is the process of identifying safe, useable food that would otherwise be wasted and ensuring it does not go to landfill or to be composted but is used to its fullest potential. The topic of food recovery has come up a number of times in our discussions with the board and most recently in our strategic planning process. The Table already engages in a significant amount of food recovery but there certainly could be new opportunities for us to explore. In the staff team we have discussed this at a conceptual level and identified some concerns about expanding our efforts in food recovery. These concerns do not preclude extending our efforts in food recovery but are cautions or conditions we feel need to be addressed if we do.

Food waste is a public concern for a number of reasons.

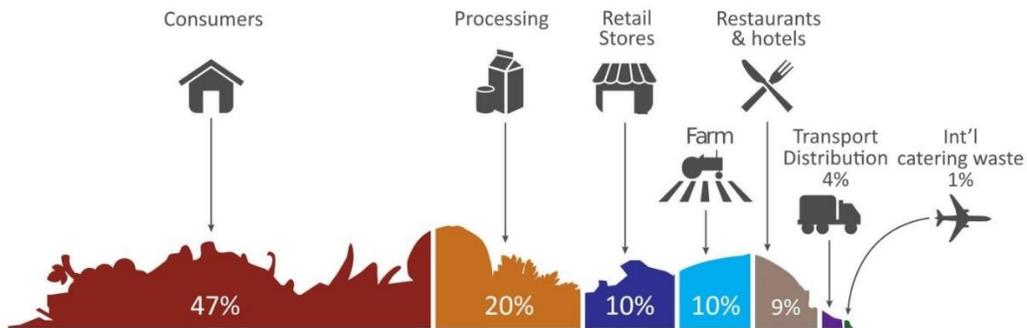
- When food waste is landfilled it generates significant amounts of methane which is a greenhouse gas much more potent than CO₂. Even with a green bin diversion program Perth's landfill is one of the municipality's most significant sources of greenhouse gases.
- Landfills are filling up and given how difficult and expensive it is to develop a new landfill, keeping food waste out of landfills extends the life of existing facilities.
- Food production is resource intensive and wasting food wastes precious resources like water, nutrients, and the energy used to grow, process and transport the food.
- The degree to which food is wasted represents a loss of cultural value for food beyond the financial.
- In a world where many people do not have enough good, healthy food it is a real shame that so much food is wasted.

It is no surprise this issue has come up given The Table's mandate and role in the local food system, and given the prominence the issue of food waste has achieved in recent years. Numerous media reports, studies and government consultations have led to the issue being very much in the public consciousness...

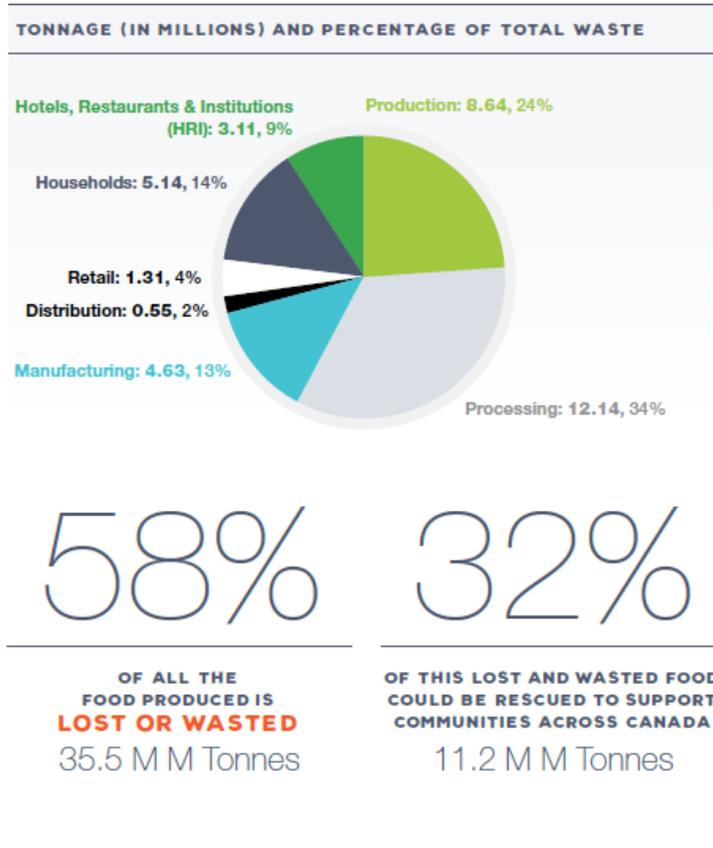
- Food waste is identified as a priority issue in Canada's new national food policy *A Place at The Table*ⁱ. The previous Ontario government had gone some distance in developing plans to reduce food waste. Currently government documents are less detailed but do still reference reducing organic and food waste in the *Made in Ontario Environment Plan*.ⁱⁱ
- A recent study that received considerable attention is Second Harvest's *The Avoidable Crisis of Food Waste*ⁱⁱⁱ. This study highlighted the amount of waste that is generated early in the food

chain, shifting some of the focus away from the consumer which is often identified as the source of the largest portion of food wasted. See contrasting graphics below.

- Second Harvest has launched an app *FoodRescue.ca* to connect businesses in the food sector with organizations that could use surplus food. (The Table is registered but has yet to successfully receive any donations through the app.)
- Food Banks Canada recently released a report on food recovery which encourages food banks to further explore opportunities of sourcing “free” recoverable food to support their programs. They provide several case studies where community food organizations successfully used food recovery to significantly improve their programs.



Value of food waste by sector from Ontario Food and Organic Waste Strategy



THE SOURCE, VOLUME AND VALUE OF AVOIDABLE FLW

FOOD SUPPLY CHAIN STAGE	VOLUME (MILLION TONNE)	VALUE (BILLION)
Production (Produce Only)	0.66	\$2.88
Processing & Manufacturing	4.82	\$20.96
Distribution	.55	\$2.41
Retail	1.31	\$5.70
Consumer	2.38	\$10.37
HRI	1.44	\$7.14
TOTAL	11.17	\$49.46

Amount and value of food loss and waste in food chain from *Avoidable Crisis of Food Waste*

At The Table we currently do a considerable amount of food recovery.

- Receive and process regular donations from 3 local grocery retailers
- Receive reclamations through Feed Ontario. This is non-perishable foods that are donated by processors or retailers, sent to a central location then distributed out to the Feed Ontario network.
- Receive and process donations by local farmers and gardeners of surplus produce in the growing season.

- We rescue produce, primarily apples, from trees that are not being harvested, and have done a few harvests at farms where the farmer could not or it did not make financial sense for them to harvest useable produce. These “gleaning” outings provide both an opportunity for food recovery and a fun and social outing for the gleaners.
- Food drives and donations at the centre provide opportunities for people to donate non-perishable items they don’t plan on using.

There is no disagreement in the food sector or amongst the staff team at The Table that food waste should be reduced and useable food used. Whose responsibility this is, and the extent to which the issues of food waste and food insecurity should be addressed together is, however, much more contentious.

During provincial consultations on food and organic waste reduction the Ontario Society of Nutrition Professionals in Public Health (OSNPPH), the Ontario Public Health Association (OPHA), and the U of T food insecurity research group PROOF submitted a letter to the government opposing the linkage of food waste reduction and food insecurity. The letter argued that food insecurity is fundamentally an economic issue and therefore distributing recovered food would not be able to address the root issues. It also encouraged the government to work upstream and ensure waste is prevented rather than having to be managed by another organization.

We share the analysis of the above agencies, as our Good Food Bank Coordinator Wendy Quarrington put it “putting two broken systems together isn’t likely going to result in a system that works”. That said, we do see some role for food recovery, absent immediate economic solutions, to help mitigate access to food. In contemplating adding more food recovery efforts to what we already do we have a number of concerns.

Real and perceived equity issues – We believe that all people should have ready access to quality food, so identifying recovered food as an opportunity unique for people living on low-incomes further entrenches a two tiered food system and reinforces the haves and have-nots in society. There is also an important issue of corporations being able to off-load a serious economic and logistical problem, how to manage their food waste, onto food charities. Not only can they shift the responsibility but in the process reduce their tax burden and contribution to public good through government revenues.

Messaging – We’ve spent a lot of time and effort and made amazing progress educating community about the food we want to receive through donations. We don’t want to confuse our message of quality food for healthy people and have more people see us as a place to empty their fridge / pantry. Despite our progress we still do get some of this and it can take up a lot of time. The other day we had someone bring in a few items to donate including a jar of mustard that was 1/3 used and had a best before date of 2016!

Transportation, processing and storage – We are very limited by our capacity to be able to sort, store and dispose of any more more recovered food than we currently manage. Considerable volunteer and staff hours, and mileage already go into dealing with recovered food. Any significant increase in food recovery efforts will likely result in a need for additional physical infrastructure – especially storage.

Consistency of food available – The quantity and quality of recoverable food is highly variable. In contrast, in our programs we pride ourselves in providing consistent quality and quantity. Especially in a smaller community where the number of sources is limited, food recovery may not be able to support our core offerings because many of the waste streams are not reliable.

Disposing of what we can't use – At the end of the day we will still need to dispose of a significant amount of food that is brought in for recovery because it's not up to our standards or can't be used in a timely way. We currently do not pay for waste disposal as our green bins, recycling and trash are collected by the town's curb-side service and much of the unusable food from the Good Food Bank was picked up by a local pig farmer. We are currently looking to find someone to replace them. Should we increase our volume significantly we may need to look into another options for managing the food we cannot use. Managing our existing waste stream is already a challenge in terms of storing between pick-ups, managing smell and pests, keeping bins clean etc. Not surprisingly this is also the hardest part of our operation for which to find volunteers.

ⁱ *A Food Policy for Canada, A Place at the Table*, 2019. Agriculture Canada

<https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/aafc-aac/documents/20190614-en.pdf>

ⁱⁱ *Made in Ontario Environmental Plan*, May 7, 2019 update. Accessed November 5, 2019. Ministry of the Environment, Conservation and Parks. <https://www.ontario.ca/page/made-in-ontario-environment-plan>

ⁱⁱⁱ The Avoidable Crisis of Food Waste. 2019. Second Harvest

<https://secondharvest.ca/research/the-avoidable-crisis-of-food-waste/>