

## From Farm to Landfill

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Feeding the planet is nearly always discussed as if it were mainly a matter of growing more food. It is not going to be that simple. In 2012 this planet will produce a record grain yield of 2.4 billion tons. That is a 1 percent increase over last year, a number slightly smaller than expected because of a devastating drought in this country that will result in a harvest 70 million tons short of earlier projections. One percent is a slender margin of growth when it comes to feeding a global human population where at least one in seven people go hungry.

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One way to provide more food is to waste less food. Using a wide array of official sources, the Natural Resources Defense Council has produced a report that tries to measure the scale of wasted food — and the wasted energy and water associated with it — in the United States. One of the most telling indicators is simply how hard it is to gain accurate data about food waste, unlike numbers for food production, which are tracked in detail. The best estimate is that 40 percent of food in this country is never eaten.

The sheer waste is bad enough, a mindless squandering of calories, nutrition, energy and water. But that uneaten food also rots in landfills, generating as much as a quarter of this country's emissions of methane, a powerful greenhouse gas.

This trend is relatively new. Americans waste half again as much food as we did in the 1970s. And systemic food waste and rates of obesity have climbed together. According to the N.R.D.C. report, there are efficiencies to be gained all through the food system, from the farm to the supermarket. There are losses associated with production, harvest, handling, packaging, distribution and retail. But the greatest rate of loss comes when food enters the hands of consumers. Far too much of it ends up in the garbage for reasons that have to do with everything from bad shopping habits to inconsistent date labeling.

When it comes to reducing waste, Europe is well ahead of America. In Britain it has become a national initiative. In 2010, the European Union published a detailed, systematic report on food waste, which soon entered the political conversation. The Department of Agriculture needs to do

the same. A comprehensive, sober look at where food waste occurs would help make it clear just how our habits — agricultural, corporate and individual — need to change.

Then comes the hard work: Actually changing them. Unless waste is reduced, agriculture will always be the Red Queen, running as fast as it can to stay in one place.

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