



Reduction of Food Waste – A Sustainable Packaging Goal for the Industry



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A year ago, the FAO released a report *Global Food Losses and Food Waste*. Their key finding was that “roughly one-third of food produced in the world for human consumption every year – approximately 1.3 billion tonnes – gets lost or wasted.” While the overall food waste and losses were on similar scales between industrial nations (670 million tonnes) and developing countries (630 million tonnes), where in the value chain the losses occurred were notably different.

Not surprisingly, industrial countries were the most wasteful per capita (95-110 kg/yr) with most of the food waste coming from post-retail and post-consumer sources. In contrast, food losses from developing countries occurred during harvest, storage, transportation, and food processing. The report noted the opportunity for better packaging to reduce food losses within the value chain in addition to other strategies like better storage, improved cold chain, and farm to business communication. So where is the linkage to sustainable packaging?

There are over 7 billion people on the planet today and 9 billion scheduled for 2050. While strides have been made to alleviate poverty in the past decade, still almost half of the world’s population live below the International definition of poverty, or \$2 a day. And food is getting more expensive. The U.S. is experiencing its worst drought in 50 years and is causing the third spike in global food prices in the past five years. The poor tend to spend more of their budget on food than wealthier individuals and are hardest hit by price increases.

So there is an opportunity for packaging to address the whole triple bottom line of sustainability by addressing food waste. Addressing food waste conserves resources, reduces environmental impacts, reduces supply chain and consumer costs, and of course, saves food. By taking a systems view of food production and creating value chains that deliver food more efficiently through well-designed packaging that can be recovered or recycled, I believe we succeed in creating more sustainable packaging and more sustainable food systems.

Over the past ten years, there has been a trend within businesses toward developing more quantitative and fact-based positions on environmentally sustainable packaging and shifting away from positions that were based on perceptions of what was environmentally good packaging.

Sustainable packaging is often associated with a range of environmental characteristics, some of which may view packaging solely as waste. However, as life cycle thinking and more systemic quantitative methods have been adopted, some of the long-held biases about packaging as waste are being challenged and some opportunities to tap areas where the social and economic value of packaging has yet to be realized are being discovered, particularly in the area of food waste.

Any company that has gone through the exercise of developing a well informed sustainable packaging position knows that it isn't easy. It comes from hard work and research to develop a science-based life cycle understanding of not just packaging but also the product that the package is protecting. Nowhere is it more important to be informed than for food products where the environmental impact of the food can be many times more significant than the packaging that is protecting it. For instance, the production of meat and dairy products are very impactful for most environmental impact categories. As companies have become more enlightened on the high environmental consequences of food production, they are also recognizing the important role packaging plays in protecting food and its associated investment.

To quote Robert van Otterdijk from the FAO, "Even if just one-fourth of the food currently being lost or wasted globally could be saved, it would be enough to feed 900 million hungry people in the world." That could be quite a sustainable packaging goal worth shooting for.

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Sources:

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FAO SAVE FOOD Initiative - <http://www.fao.org/save-food/save-food-home/en/>

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