

Half of all food 'wasted' report claims



The report said half the food bought in Europe and the US ended up in the bin

As much as half of the world's food, amounting to two billion tonnes worth, is wasted, a UK-based report has claimed.

The Institution of Mechanical Engineers said the waste was being caused by poor storage, strict sell-by dates, bulk offers and consumer fussiness.

The study also found that up to 30% of vegetables in the UK were not harvested because of their physical appearance.

The institution's Dr Tim Fox said the level of waste was "staggering".

'Waste of resources'

The report said that between 30% and 50% of the four billion tonnes of food produced around the world each year went to waste.

It suggested that half the food bought in Europe and the US was thrown away.

Dr Fox, head of energy and environment at the Institution of Mechanical Engineers, said: "The amount of food wasted and lost around the world is staggering. This is food that could be used to feed the world's growing population - as well as those in hunger today."

Food waste is a subject that people get very incensed about. But this report, while re-iterating the scale of the problem, doesn't really advance the story.

The Institution of Mechanical Engineers review draws heavily on work carried out over a number of years for the Food and Agriculture Organisation of UN. However one expert in the field suggested that there was no absolutely reliable global data on the level of waste.

One of the boldest claims in the report is that "30% of the UK vegetable crop is never harvested."

It suggests that farmers are leaving vegetables in the ground because they don't meet the supermarket standards required. The research on which that claim is based is from 2008 and only looks at potatoes. It concludes that 6% is lost at field level while 22% is either thrown away or diverted to other markets during processing.

The headline claim that up to 50% of all food is thrown away really depends on your definitions, one researcher told me. At least a difference should be made between food losses and food waste.

"It is also an unnecessary waste of the land, water and energy resources that were used in the production, processing and distribution of this food.

"The reasons for this situation range from poor engineering and agricultural practices, inadequate transport and storage infrastructure through to supermarkets demanding cosmetically perfect foodstuffs and encouraging consumers to overbuy through buy-one-get-one-free offers."

And he told the BBC's Today programme: "If you're in the developing world, then the losses are in the early part of the food supply chain, so between the field and the marketplace.

"In the mature, developed economies the waste is really down to poor marketing practices and consumer behaviour."

The report - Global Food; Waste Not, Want Not - also found that huge amounts of water, totalling 550 billion cubic metres, were being used to grow crops that were never eaten.

The institution said the demand for water for food production could reach 10 to 13 trillion cubic metres a year by 2050.

The United Nations predicts there will be an extra three billion mouths to feed by 2075 as the global population swells to 9.5 billion.

Dr Fox added: "As water, land and energy resources come under increasing pressure from competing human demands, engineers have a crucial role to play in preventing food loss and waste by developing more efficient ways of growing, transporting and storing foods.

"But in order for this to happen governments, development agencies and organisation like the UN must work together to help change people's mindsets on waste and discourage wasteful practices by farmers, food producers, supermarkets and consumers."

Tristram Stuart, from food waste campaign group Feeding the 5000, said: "Amazingly, there has been no systematic study of food waste at the farm level either in the UK or elsewhere in Europe or the US.

"In my experience, it's normal practice for farmers to assume that 20% to 40% of their fruit and vegetable crops won't get to market, even if they are perfectly fit for human consumption."

Tom Tanner, from the Sustainable Restaurants Association, said: "It is the power of major retailers - convenience shopping and supermarkets on everyone's doorstep, you can nip out and buy a ready made meal in 2 minutes rather than make use of what's in your fridge."

He added that the weight of food equivalent to three double decker buses is thrown away per restaurant per year in the UK - 30% of that is off the consumer's plate.

Matt McGrath - BBC