

Food waste – let's think outside the box



Tackling food waste is a challenge for all of us. By taking action today, everyone benefits, and the environment, too.

By MARIE-CLAUDE BIBEAU

Every year, over half of the food produced in Canada is lost or wasted –from the field, processors, the grocery store, or the refrigerator.

According to Second Harvest and Value Chain Management International, the amount of avoidable food waste in Canada is equivalent to the weight of almost 95 CN Towers and worth almost \$50 billion! Uneaten food often ends up in landfills and generates methane, accounting for a staggering 8% of all greenhouse gases worldwide.

If we are going to create a sustainable food system that can feed the world, we need to do better. We all have a role to play. Personally, I've been keeping a closer eye on the back of my fridge so no veggies go to waste when they could be turned into a delicious meal. As well, knowing that best-before dates on food products are not the same as expiration dates, I use other clues to judge which foods can be kept longer and eaten, rather than thrown out. And I always compost my peels and food scraps to help return the nutrients to the soil and not create unnecessary greenhouse gases (GHG) by putting food waste in the garbage.

On the grand scale, tackling the issue of food waste is a monumental challenge that requires THINKING BIG!

Last fall, the Government of Canada launched the \$20-million Food Waste Reduction Challenge, a key component of our Food Policy for Canada. The first two streams focus on business-model solutions to prevent or divert food waste at any point along the supply chain, from farm to plate. The response was incredible – we received 343 applications for the first round alone. Twenty-four innovators have been granted \$100,000 and have moved on to the market demonstration stage of the Challenge.

That includes the team at Food Cycle Sciences Corporation, which has developed an at-home energy-efficient food waste recycler that's about the size of a bread maker! Pilot projects are underway in small towns and communities to assess how the device can reduce costs and greenhouse gas emissions compared to traditional organic waste collection and environmental impacts from landfills. For example, in 2020, the City of Nelson, British Columbia launched the FoodCycler Pilot Program in 151 households over a two-month period, resulting in a reduction of 15 tonnes of food waste.

In May, we launched the second phase of the Challenge, this one focussing on technology. Up to \$6.5 million in prize funding will be awarded to innovators with novel technologies that can extend the life of food or transform food that would otherwise be lost or wasted. We're looking for solutions that are high-impact, transformative, can be scaled up, and benefit the environment and our communities, too.

As well as the Challenge, our Government is also taking action on food waste by investing in companies such as Enterra in Calgary, which is using local food waste to feed insects and turn them into protein-rich pet food and fertilizer, as well as projects funded through the Low Carbon Economy Fund that are using organic waste to reduce GHG emissions in Ontario and British Columbia.

Overall, our Government has invested over \$100 million to reduce, repurpose and recycle food waste in Canada. This includes the \$50 million Surplus Food Rescue Program that was launched as part of Canada's response to the pandemic, which helped rescue and distribute 8 million kilos of surplus food to food banks and community food organizations across Canada. As well, we awarded the city of Guelph with the Smart Cities Challenge prize for their proposal to become Canada's first circular food economy.

Tackling food waste is a challenge for all of us. By taking action today, we can save money, support those in need, protect the environment and create new business opportunities. Whether it's a multi-million-dollar business venture or a back-of-fridge stew, let's keep working on solutions.

The Honourable Marie-Claude Bibeau, PC, MP, is Canada's Minister of Agriculture and Agri-Food.