

What a waste

Melissa Smith, Horticulture Lead, End Food Waste Australia

A staggering 7.6 million tonnes of food goes to waste in Australia every year, enough food to fill the MCG to the brim near ten times. What's more, 50% of this is fruit and vegetables (FIAL 2021).

Australia's fresh produce is too good to waste. And so, we've been working on a plan – and identified nine priority actions – to tackle horticulture food waste, and help growers sell more and people eat more of Australia's world-revered fresh produce. These actions are set to be impactful, profitable and possible – with a successful example of action underway in Australia's berry industry already.

The **Horticulture Sector Action Plan**, developed by End Food Waste Australia, researchers at Central Queensland University and through extensive collaboration with stakeholders, is a first-of-its-kind in Australia looking at collaborative and impactful solutions to tackling horticulture food waste from farm to retail.

But why end food waste?

Fighting food waste is good for people, the planet and industry profitability. It really is a triple bottom line.

For people, ending food waste will have a direct impact on reducing food insecurity. Last year, 2.3 million Australian households (23%) went hungry regularly (Foodbank 2023). Australian Food Pact Signatories – businesses including Coles, Woolworths, Simplot and Mars – donated the equivalent of 136 million meals in the last two years helping to divert food from waste streams to food rescue.

For the planet, reducing food waste will minimise the 17.5 million tonnes of CO₂-e that is generated from wasted food (FIAL 2021), and help preserve the land, water, energy and fuel used to produce and distribute that food.

For industry profitability, reducing food waste means using more of what is produced and making the most of inputs and staff time. Further, as industry growth progressively relies on export, maintaining and increasing export market share will rely on meeting the standards of stricter supplier codes of conduct and responsible sourcing programs, often including action on food waste reduction.

What will it take?

Fighting food waste is a challenge too big for anyone, or any single sector, to tackle alone. Within horticulture there is action needed on farm, in transportation, manufacturing, retail, hospitality and in the home – it really will take everyone.

The **Horticulture Sector Action Plan** is looking at strategies that **enable** food waste reduction, **prevent** food waste from occurring, and **repurpose** surplus food to keep it in the food supply chain.

What does food waste action look like?

Food waste action in horticulture requires getting a better grasp on the food waste challenges that exist and enabling the system to perform as efficiently as possible, and these are addressed through four action areas:

1. Identifying root causes of food waste on a commodity-specific level
2. Improving food waste data and measurement, because what gets measured gets managed
3. Implementation of the right supporting policies
4. Accelerating innovation and technology solutions for food waste reduction

These actions in practice will look like increased dedicated food waste reduction research, frameworks for on-farm food waste measurement and reporting, development of commodity-specific food waste sector action plans, review of the Food And Grocery, and Horticulture Codes of Conduct, potential development of standards and certification around food waste minimisation, and the use of supporting technologies and digital tools to reduce waste.

Three key action areas importantly focus on preventing food waste from occurring in the first place.

These actions have some of the biggest cost-benefit opportunities for growers, avoiding costs of production and disposal, and instead helping get more produce to market, these are:

1. Managing overproduction
2. Addressing labour shortages
3. Reviewing product specifications

These actions could look like new or improved platforms and support for forecasting, improved awareness and communication across the supply chain to help create a more balanced demand and supply of fresh produce, and whole crop purchasing arrangements.

For the horticulture workforce, research and increased resources and education to address labour shortages, and investigation of the impact of automation or AI on the horticulture workforce could also help reduce food waste.

A review of product specifications would include a detailed understanding of specifications and the link to food waste, supported by consumer awareness and food literacy.

Finally, growing the ability for growers and suppliers to repurpose food instead of it going to waste is addressed in the final two priority action areas:

1. Support and find ways to value-add surplus and potential waste produce
2. Supporting new and improved mechanisms to get surplus and potential waste produce to food rescue charities such as Foodbank, OzHarvest, SecondBite and FareShare

For unavoidable surplus or potential food waste, these actions help keep fresh produce in the food supply chain. Many growers generously donate to charities but there are currently logistical and cost barriers, and a proposed tax incentive to support the costs of donation and sharing of and access to available logistics such as bins, transport and cold storage would help get more food to food-insecure Australians around the country.



Reviewing produce specifications has a large part to play in addressing food waste at the farm level

Photo credit: End Food Waste Australia



Bulk donation of out-of-spec tomatoes from Australian Food Pact Signatories Simon George & Sons to food rescue organisation FareShare. Photo credit: End Food Waste Australia

And back to the example of action underway in the berry industry, value-add and upcycled opportunities for surplus or potential waste fresh produce could look like the work occurring at Oz Group Coop – who estimate an incredible 95% of projected blueberry waste is set to be re-processed.

Following research and investment, Oz Group are repurposing surplus or waste/third grade produce through new products like snap frozen berries and jam, or allowing other companies to incorporate graded-out fruit into their powder or juice products. Early sales from the new products have generated “healthy revenue and helped to even out cash flow”.

Oz Group noted environmental benefits too with reduced transportation and disposal. See PAGE 63 of the Australian Berry Journal Spring 2023 edition for more on this great story.

This powerful example within the berry industry shows that the **Horticulture Sector Action Plan** highlights impactful, possible and profitable solutions for Australia’s fresh produce food waste.

What’s next?

The intention is to bring these actions to life through collaboration with industry, government, researchers, consumers and the entire food supply chain.

We encourage everyone to read about the **Horticulture Sector Action Plan** at endfoodwaste.com.au/horticulture. And I invite you to reach out to me if you’re interested in learning more or getting involved. Ending food waste starts with all of us!

**For more information, please contact
Melissa Smith: melissa@endfoodwaste.com.au**

References:

1. FIAL, 2021. The National Food Waste Strategy Feasibility Study – Final Report
2. Foodbank, 2023. Foodbank Hunger Report 2023

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