

**F**ood waste is a reality in modern America: 40 percent of the food we produce goes straight to the landfill, while 14 percent of American families often don't know where their next meal is coming from.<sup>1,2</sup> It's a reality we clearly need to address. Even at the farm level.

But don't be fooled: food waste is not just a Big Ag problem.

"Very little is wasted as produce is packed and sent out to either markets or CSA," says Erik Fellenz of Fellenz Family Farm in Phelps (Ontario Co.). "But our largest 'waste' by far is from unharvested produce. This generally happens when supply exceeds demand, to the point where it will cost more to harvest and pack than the end product."

"My food waste comes from the inability to move all of my product due to a lack of consistency and greens eaters at markets," says James Cagle of Buzz's Garden in Mendon (Monroe Co.). "I tried selling at the public market and it was impossible to compete with the resellers' prices."

"We've sent extra tomatoes and other gleanings to Milly's Pantry in Penn Yan and places up in Rochester," says Jonathon Hunt of Italy Hill Produce in Branchport (Yates Co.). "But it barely scratched the surface, and we've had to rely almost completely on a friend's time, labor and commitment"

"We had a field of sweet corn, some of which got harvested for fresh market. But it all got ripe in the middle of 90-degree weather

## What Is Farm-Level Food Waste?

by Matt Kelly



These excess organic tomatoes are a tiny fraction of the U.S. farm produce discarded each year.

Photo by Matt Kelly

and it went past very fast," says Mary-Howell Martens of Lakeview Organic Grains in Penn Yan (Yates Co.). "It will be turned into high sugar, high quality forage for our neighbors' dairy cows."

### Finding Solutions

The extent of food waste occurring on farms, both big and small, is anything but clear—which makes it much tougher to come up with solutions. The U.S.

Department of Agriculture's reports on food waste in this country are helpful, providing a broad understanding the problem, but lack concrete numbers about the farm-level waste specifically:

*"Food losses begin on the farm even before a commodity moves into the marketing system. Although ERS [Economic Research Service] was not able to quantify food losses that occur on the farm or between the farm and retail levels, anecdotal evidence suggests that such losses*

can be significant for some commodities.<sup>3</sup>

*“More specific food loss estimates could help policymakers in designing food-loss-reducing regulations. Publicizing where and how much food goes uneaten and the value of this loss may help inform policymakers about the issue and help increase the efficiency of the farm-to-fork food system and food recovery efforts to feed the growing human population.”<sup>4</sup>*

Since we’re currently relying on anecdotal evidence to understand the amount of waste occurring on farms, we need to talk to as many different farmers as possible before coming up with solutions. And we need to start with a conversation about what we mean by “food waste.”

*“Food loss’ represents the amount of edible food, postharvest, that is available for human consumption but is not consumed for any reason; it includes cooking loss and natural shrinkage (e.g., moisture loss); loss from mold, pests, or inadequate climate control; and plate waste. ‘Food waste’ is a component of food loss and occurs when an edible item goes unconsumed, such as food discarded by retailers due to undesirable color or blemishes and plate waste discarded by consumers.”<sup>4</sup>*

The definition from the USDA is certainly helpful. But it might not reflect the reality on the ground when it comes to actually growing food for our communities.

### Different Perspectives

For Erik Fellenz, food waste is subjective in farming. “We have ‘waste’ in production and packing, but much of the ‘waste’ becomes chicken food. So depending on your perspective it might not be waste at all.”

“This is, of course, what ‘slopping the pigs’ or grazing a

field after harvest was all about,” agrees Mary-Howell Martens. “But these very common traditional farm practices have been lost, now that animal feed production and meat/dairy production generally occur in totally unrelated and distant locations—where vast quantities of synthetic fertilizers and pesticides feed the corn, manure becomes toxic waste, petroleum is consumed in staggering amounts, and there is a huge messy disconnect between what should be a relatively closed loop.”

“What doesn’t make sense to me is that crop loss counts as food loss,” says Caroline Boutard-Hunt of Italy Hill Produce. “I hate wasting corn meal: we’ve put all this time and energy into bringing it out of the field, grinding it, packing it and storing it. But the stuff that farmers leave in the field is just plant matter. It’s not really food yet.”

James Cagle shares a similar perspective: “When I do end up tilling under crops, it’s because they’re unpalatable and no one is going to want my stunted, bug-ridden and bitter braising mix.”

How you define both “food” and “waste” will very much determine the solutions you prefer, as will your point of view on why it’s important to deal with food waste at all. If you see it primarily as a matter of social justice—22 percent of children in New York live with food insecurity<sup>5</sup> and we need to feed them—then plowing under surplus crops seems absolutely crazy. But composting and feeding surplus to livestock sounds brilliant from an environmental perspective: let’s make our soil powerful again—both to grow healthy food and jump start carbon sequestration—and realign the resources we put in to producing meat.

Honoring the range of perspectives will be the key to ensuring that our abundance is not wasted and every person in the community has a full plate. But these various points of view will certainly cause us to bump up against each other in the process. The perspectives of those who grow the food and those who consume it can be very different.

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