

Will the rise of ecommerce hamper efforts to reduce food waste?

The newly created Coalition of Action on Food Waste will be joined by Kellogg's, Nestle, Sainsbury's, Tesco, and French cheese maker Bel Group, among others. Set up by the Consumer Goods Forum, the initiative features 14 retailers and food majors, all of which have committed to halving food waste within their operations by 2030 and adhering to United Nations' (UN) Sustainable Development Goal 2 (Zero Hunger) which encompasses global food waste.

Around 1.3 billion mt of food is wasted each year, equating to a \$940B annual loss to the global economy, according to UN estimates.

Why does this matter? The pledge to halve food waste by 2030 had previously been adopted by more than 100 UK retailers in 2019, prior to the forming of this coalition. The move followed the UK

government announcing £15M (\$19.7M) was being made available to tackle the issue.

French firms, including those mentioned above, have also previously taken action domestically. More than 40 food producers signed an agreement earlier this year to tackle misleading food labels, which could result in more produce being discarded unnecessarily. The European Commission estimates labelling is responsible for 20% of food wastage, while some studies have shown more than half of consumers misunderstand the meaning of labels.

One organisation working with the coalition is Denmark-based Too Good to Go, which has lobbied for widespread usage of an “often good after” label. The firm primarily looks to connect sellers of food destined for disposal with potential buyers.

One headwind for these efforts may be the increasing reliance on delivery services amid the Covid-19 pandemic. Studies have argued that opening more grocery stores cuts down on waste, since consumers can buy fresh produce more often at locations close to their homes. Infrequent deliveries, on the other hand, may promote ordering large quantities of produce potentially leading to more food being thrown away after it’s purchased.

In 2019, commentators noted that, despite food redistribution efforts increasing, reductions in food waste have stagnated since 2015. A 2017 research paper published in the Journal of Retail and Consumer Services argued ecommerce’s rise could lead to increased food waste given consumers tend to take less care choosing products when shopping online.

It does appear, however, that some consumers have shown concern for the issue. A survey of European consumers conducted earlier this year, for example, showed 77% of German shoppers identifying food waste as the main reason they wouldn’t buy groceries online. Instead, this cohort said they preferred to buy fresh items in smaller batches more regularly to avoid products spoiling.

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