

Feasibility of ambitious legally binding EU food waste reduction targets

Summary & Key Recommendations

An estimated 40% of food is wasted globally¹, which causes an estimated 8–10% of global emissions², and uses an estimated 28% of the world's agricultural land area, larger than China and India combined³.

65 organisations from 20 EU countries have signed a [statement](#) calling for the EU to introduce legally-binding targets to reduce EU food loss and waste by 50% from farm to fork by 2030. This briefing provides evidence that ambitious legally-binding food waste reduction targets for EU Member States under the Waste Framework Directive (WFD) are both feasible and will result in significant cost savings. Whilst we advocate for 50% reductions in food loss and waste from farm to fork, recognising the context of compromises in the current negotiations, we make the following recommendations:

- **Manufacturing and processing:** We recommend that targets for manufacturing and processing sector food waste should be set at the same level as for later stages in the supply chain – ideally 40%, but at least 25%. It is unfair and inconsistent to set lower targets for the manufacturing and processing sectors. We present evidence that the UK has achieved over 25% reductions in manufacturing food waste over 10 years, and numerous large manufacturers have achieved rates of food waste reduction in line with 30%, 40%, and even 50% reductions by 2030.
- **Households, retail, restaurants, and food services:** We commend the European Parliament's proposal for 40% reductions in per capita food waste in households, retail, restaurants, and food services, and recommend that the Council and Commission back at least this level of ambition. We present evidence that food waste reductions of at least this speed are feasible.

Toine Timmermans, former coordinator for EU FUSIONS and EU REFRESH (flagship EU food waste programmes) and now Director at Stichting Samen Tegen Voedselverspilling (Netherlands' voluntary food waste agreement):



“The European Parliament's proposed food waste targets are ambitious but feasible, if we take a systemic and collaborative multi-stakeholder approach – **I would urge EU policymakers to back these 40% targets and to raise the extremely low targets for manufacturing in line with other sectors.** A 50% reduction in total food waste is within reach for both the retail and food service sectors, with a more strategic approach drawing on policies like state-of-the-art forecasting algorithms, quality driven replenishment systems, and markdown policies. At household level, a 40% reduction in food waste would be highly ambitious but feasible – reductions can be accelerated through changes in retailer and producer policies such as offering smaller portion sizes and packages, and communicating more clearly about food preservation and best-before dates on packaging. In the manufacturing sector, multiple Dutch manufacturers have shown that 50% reductions are also possible, and the target should certainly be set far higher than 10% – a target this low won't give incentives to the sector to speed up actions and is a missed huge opportunity. Excluding primary sector in the scope for the binding targets is a huge omission, as it is important to have an integrated, whole system approach – so it is essential that we start to measure unharvested food waste from this sector and review in future including this sector within reduction targets.”

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Note: This Policy Brief was written on behalf of the Prevent Waste Coalition, consisting of Feedback EU, Zero Waste Europe, the European Environmental Bureau, Too Good To Go, and Safe Food Advocacy Europe.

EU Member States who have already spent many years measuring and reducing food waste are permitted to use earlier baseline years than 2020, where data is available. This means they are rewarded for their existing achievements, and a slower pace of food waste reduction is required. At the same time, countries who have only started measuring and reducing food waste from 2020 have the benefit of being able to learn from those who have pioneered reductions in food waste over the last ten years – they can copy successful policies, and thus achieve the faster pace of food waste reduction necessary to catch up.

Even when using a 2020 baseline, there is strong evidence that food waste reduction can be achieved at sufficient speed to meet food waste reduction targets towards the higher end of ambition reductions by 2030. In Figures 2 and 3, we show evidence of some of the world’s largest companies and countries achieving the necessary speed of food waste reduction (colours show compatibility with different food waste targets as indicated in Figure 1). The below table shows the speed needed to reach 2030 targets if a 2020 or 2015 baseline is used.

Figure 1

Annual food waste reduction required to meet different food waste targets

Overall food waste reduction target by 2030 (%)	Annual food waste reduction needed to meet target using 2020 baseline (%)	Annual food waste reduction needed to meet target using 2015 baseline (%)	COLOUR KEY for tables below
50%	5%	3.3%	Compatible with 50% reductions by 2030
40%	4%	2.7%	Compatible with 40% reductions by 2030
30%	3%	2%	Compatible with 30% reductions by 2030
20%	2%	1.3%	Compatible with 20% reductions by 2030

PROCESSING AND MANUFACTURING

We particularly recommend setting higher targets for manufacturing and processing, as these are currently set unjustifiably low – which is unfair and inconsistent. Existing evidence overwhelmingly shows that it is feasible to reduce food waste in the processing and manufacturing sector at a faster rate. The Commission’s Impact Assessment provides no evidence to justify proposing such an extremely low 10% reduction target for manufacturing and processing – providing only anecdotal claims which some manufacturers have told them that “potential for further reduction” is “limited”⁴, a claim which is incorrect. The UK has achieved a 27.4% reduction in manufacturing food waste over 10 years (see Figure 3), proving that reductions of at least 25% are feasible, which would be in line with the targets recommended by the UNFSS Coalition on Food is Never Waste⁵. Beyond this, many of the world’s largest processors and manufacturers have proved that far faster levels of reduction are possible – consistent with 30%, 40%, or even 50% reductions by 2030 – demonstrated in Figure 2 below. In addition to the companies below, many more manufacturing businesses have committed to achieving 50% reductions in food waste in their businesses in the future, including Mars⁶, Nestlé⁷, among others, indicating that they regard this as feasible.

Figure 2

Food waste reductions achieved by key companies/sectors in processing and manufacturing

Country/Business	Annual food waste reduction achieved (%)	Start year – End year	Total % reduction achieved over period
G's Fresh (growing, packing, and processing sites in Spain & UK) ⁸	21%	2018 – 2020	43% over 2 years
Kellogg Company* (global manufacturing operations) ⁹	7%	2016 – 2022	42% over 6 years
Danone* (processing and supply chain) ¹⁰	6.8%	2020 – 2022	13.5% over 2 years
Unilever* (global direct operations) ¹¹	5.6%	2019 – 2022	17% over 3 years
Campbell's (processing and manufacturing) ¹²	3.5%	2017 – 2022	18% over 5 years
McCain (global direct operations) ¹³	3.2%	2020 – 2023	9.5% over 3 years
UK manufacturing sector (whole sector) ¹⁴	2.7%	2011 – 2021	27.4% over 10 years

* Food waste percentage reductions presented per tonne food handled for this company.

HOUSEHOLDS, RETAIL, RESTAURANTS, AND FOOD SERVICE

We commend the European Parliament's more ambitious proposals for 40% reduction targets to reduce household, retail, restaurant, and food service food waste by 2030. The example of the Netherlands demonstrates that such a target is realistic. The Netherlands has achieved a pace of food waste reduction consistent with an over 40% reduction over 10 years in the retail sector, and with over 40% reductions over 15 years (or 30% reduction over 10 years) in its household sector. Beyond this, many of the world's largest retailers have proved that far faster levels of reduction are possible – consistent with 50% reductions by 2030.

Figure 3

Food waste reductions achieved by key companies/sectors in retail and consumption (restaurants, food services, and households)

Country/Business	Annual food waste reduction achieved (%)	Start year – End year	Total % reduction achieved over period
Compass Group (food services, 2000 sites in 26 countries) ¹⁵	28%	2020 – 2021	28% over 1 year
Iberostar (food services, 48 hotels) ¹⁶	28%	2023	28% over 1 year
Ingka Group / IKEA (restaurants, bistros, and Swedish Food Markets) ¹⁷	10.8%	2017 – 2022	54% over 5 years
ISS (food services) ¹⁸	7.5%	2019 – 2023	30% over 4 years

Lidl (retail supermarkets) ¹⁹	7.2%	2016 – 2022	43% over 6 years
Carrefour (retail supermarkets) ²⁰	6.7%	2016 – 2022	39.9% over 6 years
Kroger (retail supermarkets) ²¹	5.2%	2017 – 2022	26.2% over 5 years
Ahold Delhaize (retail) ²²	4.7%	2016 – 2023	33% over 7 years
NorgesGruppen (wholesale/retail) ²³	4.7%	2015 – 2022	33% over 7 years
Netherlands retail sector* (whole sector) ²⁴	4.4%	2018 – 2022	17.4% over 4 years
Netherlands household sector* (whole sector) ²⁵	3.3%	2015 – 2022	23% over 7 years

* Per capita.

FEASIBLE AND NECESSARY

The data above shows that ambitious food waste reduction is feasible, so EU Member States can be confident that ambitious targets are achievable. At the same time, making targets legally-binding is necessary to stretch ambition so that Member States catch up to food waste leaders by copying their effective policies. EU Member States need to introduce policies to ensure that all companies reach the same levels of reduction as industry leaders, levelling the playing field for businesses.

REDUCTION OF INEDIBLE FOOD WASTE IS POSSIBLE THROUGH BOTH PREVENTION AND ANIMAL FEED

The proposed legally-binding targets to reduce EU Member State food waste currently cover both the edible and inedible parts of wasted food.

It is vital to highlight that **it is possible to reduce inedible food waste through prevention of overproduction and overconsumption**, where the food is not produced or purchased in the first place – this reduces both the inedible and the edible parts. For instance, a business can reduce overproduction or overstocking of food, ensuring it does not end up with surplus which it cannot sell. Conversely, consumers can ensure that they buy just the right amount of food – and not buy more than they need.

Moreover, **food which is inedible to humans can also be reduced by re-using it as animal feed**, which does not have to be measured as food waste under the Delegated Decision establishing a common EU methodology to measure food waste²⁶, and counts towards food waste reduction targets. This is most relevant to the processing, manufacturing, retail, and primary production sectors, where many types of food waste are legal to send for use as animal feed – this makes achievement of food waste reduction in these sectors (for both edible and inedible parts) easier²⁷. For instance, brewer’s grains, bread, and fruit and vegetable waste are all viably used as animal feed, providing safety criteria have been followed.

HUGE COST SAVINGS FOR BUSINESSES AND HOUSEHOLDS

A study of 1,200 companies across 17 countries found that 99% reported a positive return on investment in food waste reduction²⁸, with an average cost-benefit ratio for businesses of 14:1²⁹. EU FUSIONS estimated the cost to EU countries of food waste at 143 billion euros³⁰ – meaning billions of euros in potential savings from food waste reduction.

Policymaker interventions are required to solve these cross-supply chain problems and unlock these savings. Currently, food waste is often caused by one entity and the cost is born by another – these externalities are a classic example of market failure. For instance, supermarket policies such as cosmetic rejections and unfair trading practices (e.g., last-minute order cancellations and take-back agreements) cause food waste in their suppliers – and policies such as unclear expiry dates, packaging, and portion sizes drive food waste in households. It is inaccurate to claim that there is limited potential for businesses to reduce their food waste because they already have an “inherent economic incentive to reduce food waste”³¹, as food waste is often due to externalities.

POLICY TOOLS AVAILABLE TO MEMBER STATES TO SPEED UP FOOD WASTE REDUCTION

There are many tried and tested tools available to policymakers to accelerate action on food waste, including:

- Greater cross-supply chain cooperation
- State-of-the-art forecasting algorithms
- Relaxation of cosmetic standards
- Offering smaller portion sizes and packages to consumers
- Communicating more clearly about best practice for food preservation to consumers
- Markdown policies and dynamic in-store discounts
- Educational programmes
- Improved expiry date management
- Anti-food waste shelves

Beyond this, there are many policy tools which would accelerate food waste action beyond the pace of voluntary measures by businesses alone:

- Mandatory measurement and public reporting of food waste by large food businesses – such as is currently being considered by the UK³².
- Bans and taxes on sending food waste to landfills and incineration. For instance, the Netherlands has a tax on waste sent to both incineration and landfills³³.
- Legal obligations for businesses to follow the food use hierarchy, or face penalties. For instance, Spain has introduced a draft law on the food waste hierarchy³⁴, although it omits food waste prevention – countries seeking to replicate should include food waste prevention as the top priority of the hierarchy.
- Mandatory participation in food waste reduction agreements and reduction targets for large businesses.
- Stronger Unfair Trading Practices legislation, with an explicit food waste focus.
- A levy on retailers proportional to the food waste levels of their suppliers.

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