

NOT REALLY EXPIRED: Date labels should say what they mean and mean what they say

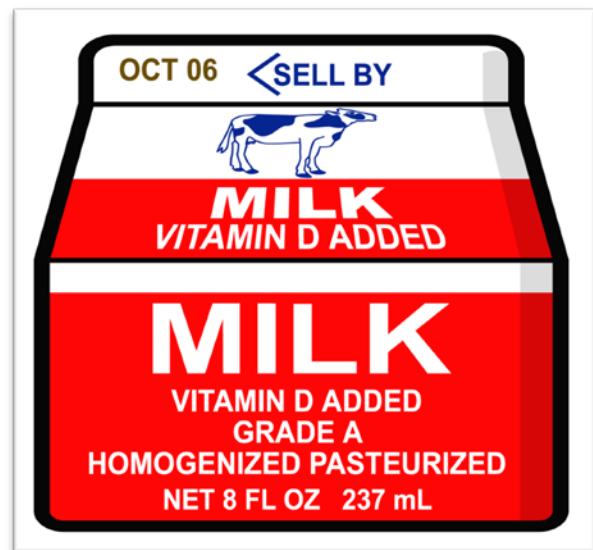
Forty percent of the food produced in the U.S. goes uneaten, resulting in 160 billion pounds of wasted food each year. This unnecessary food waste is harming our environment, our economy, and our communities. Misinterpretation of common date labels, such as “sell by,” “best by,” and “use by” is a key contributor to this waste. The good news is that a little effort to standardize date labels would go a long way towards helping Americans waste less food.

WHAT DO DATE LABELS MEAN, ANYWAY?

There's good reason to be confused! Most date labels indicate the last day on which the product will be at its peak quality—meaning the vast majority of these dates bear no relation to food safety. In fact, food industry experts in the U.S. say that not a single food safety outbreak has been traced to eating past-date food.

HOW ARE THEY REGULATED?

The Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) both have the power to regulate food labels. However, for the most part, neither agency regulates date labels on food products. Instead, date labels are governed by inconsistent state regulations and industry discretion. As a result the language used on date labels varies widely from state to state and food to food.



WHY SHOULD WE REFORM DATE LABELS?

CONSUMERS WILL SAVE MONEY

Grocery shoppers mistakenly believe that dates on food are indicators of safety. 91% of Americans report that they have thrown out food after the date, because they are afraid of safety risks. The average U.S. household tosses between \$1,560 and \$2,275 of food per year, and studies in the U.K. found that confusion over date labeling accounted for an estimated 20 percent of household food waste in that country.

FOOD-INSECURE AMERICANS WILL RECEIVE WHOLESOME MEALS

Americans waste billions of pounds of food each year, yet 14% of Americans are food insecure, meaning they lack access to enough food for an active, healthy life. It has been estimated that saving just 30% of the food we waste in the United States could feed every food insecure American a complete diet. Date label reform will reduce food waste and help fight food insecurity by increasing the amount of wholesome, edible food that can be consumed or donated to food insecure Americans.

AMERICA WILL SAVE WATER AND SLASH GREENHOUSE GAS EMISSIONS

Annually, 25% of the United States' freshwater and 300 million barrels of oil are used to produce food that goes to waste. Wasted food is typically thrown into the landfill, making food scraps the single largest contributor to municipal solid waste in landfills. Because landfills are the third largest source of greenhouse gas in the United States, reducing food waste will also help cut greenhouse gas emissions.



HOW DO WE REFORM DATE LABELS?

We need a federal law that limits the dates on our food products to two standard labels – a quality-based label and a safety-based one.

Under this law, manufacturers will have the option to use a quality-based label. However, if they choose to include a date indicating a food product's quality they will be required to use the standard phrase "best if used by." By contrast, for the very small group of foods for which the date may indicate safety, such as deli meats and prepared foods, manufacturers would be required to utilize a separate safety based phrase, "expires on". In order to

determine which foods should bear the safety-based label, the FDA should coordinate with the USDA to publish a list of foods that have a risk of being unsafe if not consumed after a certain date. Setting uniform, national standards for date labels will make it clear to consumers which foods need to be avoided past their dates and which can be safely eaten.

The federal law should also explicitly allow for the sale or donation of food after the "best if used by" quality date. State laws in 20 states restrict sale or donation of past-date food, even though the date is generally intended to indicate quality. Since quality is based on taste and is subjective, foods should be allowed to be sold or donated after that date.

To ensure Americans are best able to understand these new labels, FDA and USDA should undertake an educational campaign designed to inform consumers about the meaning of the "expires on" and "best if used by" labels. Ultimately, sensible date label reform will reduce consumer confusion, simplify regulatory compliance, and cut food waste across the supply chain and in consumers' homes.

It's Time to Change the Way We Label Our Food! Visit notreallyexpired.com to learn how you can help reform date labels.



Harvard
Food Law and Policy Clinic
A Division of the Center for Health Law and Policy Innovation