From: Jared Blumenfeld
To: Jared Blumenfeld
Cc: Teddy Ryerson
Subject: Fw: reduce food waste: plan meals (news)
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From: Robert Reed [RReed@recology.com]
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…A 3-inch-diameter bagel was once the norm and now it's 6 inches…

Waste: Composting just nibbles at problem

By Carrie Sturrock
The Oregonian
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Kimberly Smith will do her best not to waste anything from the Oregon Food Bank box she picked up in Oregon City. She can't afford to.

A round of donated cheese bread will become pizza for her husband and son after she slices it in half and spreads it with the two cans of crushed tomatoes allotted her. She knows exactly what's in her pantry and how to mix and match it with what she receives.

Her "stoup" (half stew, half soup) is made with typical food box ingredients: canned pumpkin, corn, green beans, black beans and sweet potato, to which she adds sautéed ground beef.

"If you're hungry, you find a way to use it," said Smith, 32, who works part time at a salon. "You become very resourceful -- that's the only thing you can do sometimes."

She composts rinds but usually little else. The rest she eats or freezes.

The country could take a lesson from Smith. Americans generated more than 34 million tons of food waste in 2010 -- roughly 14 percent of the municipal solid waste stream -- most of which was thrown away, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. CleanMetrics of Portland estimated that avoidable food waste in the U.S. actually exceeded 60 million tons, creating life-cycle greenhouse gas emissions of 124 million tons, or 2 percent of national emissions. A family

of four has avoidable food waste totaling $1,600 annually.

Efforts to reduce food waste are wide-ranging in the Portland metropolitan region -- from the OSU Extension Service's efforts to teach people how to cook with, can and freeze summer's abundance to a company that helps institutions nationwide measure and reduce the amount of food thrown away.

"It takes time and thought and effort to cut the waste and save the money," said Kumar Venkat, who formerly ran CleanMetrics. "If it became an ingrained habit, it would help."

While Portland's new curbside kitchen-scrap composting program is a positive change, composting is just a step above throwing food in the landfill, according to the EPA's food recovery hierarchy. The best thing people can do for their budget and the planet is reduce the food waste generated, then feed hungry people, then animals, then use what's left for things like fuel.

But often big food service operators like colleges, hospitals and casinos mistakenly believe composting is the only answer, said Andrew Shakman, president and co-founder of LeanPath in Portland. And while it's great in its way, that's akin to mopping up a leak while the water continues to run.

"With food waste, people aren't doing anything to lower the volume," he said.

His company provides food-based tracking systems that allow institutions such as the University of California at Berkeley and Linfield College to weigh and track what they're throwing away.

"Once you can measure food waste, you can dramatically reduce it," he said.

Clackamas County has struggled to launch a commercial composting program because Oregon has few facilities that take food scraps. So reducing food waste has become the main focus, said county sustainability analyst Rosalynn Greene.

She's in the beginning stages of figuring out how to connect commercial food service providers with nearby food pantries so people like Smith, who picked up an Oregon Food Bank box, can benefit from food that might otherwise be thrown away.

While Metro's Fork It Over! program helps do just that, Greene wants to create a more hands-on, user-friendly system for her county.

"We're decreasing the amount of food waste that has to be processed, but we're also giving back to the community," she said.

Fork It Over! has struggled with a low profile among businesses and food rescue agencies, which say they need increased and more reliable pickup of food donations. Another concern: As composting ramps up, that could affect the food available to rescue agencies. So Portland State University has agreed to revamp and operate the program for two years and then determine its usefulness, said Metro senior planner Jennifer Erickson.

Why so much waste?

Portion size is one reason. Think about this: A 3-inch-diameter bagel was once the norm and now it's 6 inches, according to the National Heart Lung and Blood Institute.

It might be different if food were more expensive. But for many Americans it's cheap, making up just 6 percent of the average total U.S. household expenditure compared with 35 percent in India, according to the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.

And the true cost of food is hidden.

"It's expensive when you look at the environmental and health impacts, but that's not in the dollar figures because there are large (federal) subsidies for certain foods" such as corn and wheat, said Lauren Norris, Portland's sustainability outreach manager.

The city's Be Resourceful campaign distributes 52-week menu planners with grocery list templates. Planning, whether for a family or hospital kitchen, is key to reducing waste.

Smith said that often the fresh food she receives at pantries is near its expiration date, which makes it a challenge to eat it before it goes bad.

If her parents in West Linn invite her family over for dinner, she will still try to cook the nearly expired food and freeze it.

Occasionally, a meal goes to waste.

For the most part, Smith is a model for what Kelly Streit with OSU Extension Service tries to teach in Clackamas County: Smith looks at what's in her pantry, decides what to make with it and then generates a grocery list so she doesn't buy random food. It's basic meal planning, but many don't do that because it seems overwhelming. Streit advises that people start small: Plan just two or three healthy breakfasts a week.

She also tries to empower people to stray from recipes -- as Smith does with her "stoup" -- so they can cook with what they have and not let it go to waste. She teaches classes on "skillet cooking" that mix sauces, veggies and cans of, say, tuna or chicken, to make tasty, creative meals.

"No matter your income strata, everyone has a degree of food waste in their world," she said.

Tips for reducing food waste:

- Check your refrigerator, freezer and pantry before grocery shopping.
- Plan at least two or three meals for the week.
- Make a grocery list and stick to it.
- Try cooking foods that take similar ingredients so you don't have a pantry full of exotic items that may go bad.
- Be creative: Use leftover chicken in a stir-fry one night and a stew the night after that.
- Freeze things well: To prevent freezer burn for a half-eaten bag of frozen peas, for instance, add a second vapor- and moisture-proof layer by putting it in another plastic bag or a container with a snap-on lid.
- Freeze in meal-size packages.
- For more: extension.oregonstate.edu/fch/food-preservation

http://www.oregonlive.com/living/index.ssf/2012/06/waste_composting_just_nibbles.html