

FOOD SECURITY

# Here's why food stores are ditching 'best before' labels

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Date labelling on food is confusing and is a key part of the food waste problem, experts say. Image: Unsplash/James Yarema



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- Apples, potatoes and broccoli are among hundreds of food items to have "best before" dates removed from their packaging in the UK.
- Food stores Waitrose and Marks & Spencer hope the move will cut down on food waste.
- Date labelling on food is confusing and is a key part of the food waste problem, experts say.

Tomatoes, apples, potatoes and pears are among 500 food and plant products to have ["best before" dates removed from their packaging](#) by a supermarket in the United Kingdom.

Waitrose said the move was part of its commitment to help customers cut food waste at home by 2030.

According to the Waste & Resources Action Programme (WRAP), a UK climate action charity, 70% of the [6.6 million tonnes of food thrown away by UK households](#) every year could have been eaten.

Another UK food retailer, Marks & Spencer, announced last month that it was [removing "best before" dates](#) from the labels of more than 300 fruit and vegetable products. This covers 85% of its fresh produce, M&S said, and includes the "commonly wasted" items of apples, potatoes and broccoli.

## ‘Use by’ labels switched to ‘best before’

News service Food Navigator noted [changes to food labelling](#) at a further two UK supermarkets. The [Co-op is removing "use by" dates](#) on its own-brand yoghurts to help combat the £100 million-a-year of yoghurt thrown out by UK homes when it is still safe to eat.

Supermarket chain [Morrisons is also scrapping use by dates](#) on 90% of its own brand milk.

Use by dates – which indicate food is unsafe to eat after a certain date – will be replaced on these dairy lines at both supermarkets with best before dates. These suggest a period during which products are still safe to consume, even if they're a little less fresh.

## Food waste impacts the climate

Milk is the UK's third most wasted food and drink item after potatoes and bread, according to WRAP. But it has the biggest carbon footprint of these foods because of the resources needed to produce it. "One litre of milk can account for up to 4.5kg of CO<sub>2</sub>," Morrisons says.

More than 900 million tonnes of [food is wasted worldwide](#) every year, and this accounts for between 8% and 10% of global carbon emissions, the UN Environment Programme estimates.

This means [food waste is a major contributor to climate change](#). It also increases food insecurity and contributes to biodiversity loss and pollution.

## Date label language

"[Best before](#)" dates relate to the quality of a food item, explains the European Food Information Council (EUFIC). Use by dates, on the other hand, are about food safety.

"You should not eat food past its use by date, but you can eat food past its best before date if it looks, smells and tastes fine," EUFIC says.

In an article on [food labelling in America](#), Vox says food date labels first appeared after World War II as consumers increasingly shopped at supermarkets instead of farms and small grocery stores – and wanted "the freshest food on the shelf". But food expiry dates "rarely correspond to food actually expiring or spoiling," the news site believes.



To help cut down on food waste, some supermarkets are ditching best before dates on their products. Image: European Food Information Council

## Expiry date confusion

Vox cites a landmark 2013 study called [The Dating Game](#) which concludes that date labels on food – including "use by," "best before," "sell by," and "enjoy by" dates – are confusing and inconsistent.

This convoluted system contributes to “considerable amounts” of avoidable food waste in the United States, where an estimated 40% of food goes uneaten.

More than a quarter of all the fresh water used in the US is “squandered” on producing this wasted food, say the report’s authors, the Harvard Food Law and Policy Clinic and the Natural Resources Defense Council. They call for standardisation in date labelling and note that food loss per head in the US has increased by half since 1974.

## Food waste solutions

## FOOD WASTE SOLUTIONS

In its [Food Waste Index Report 2021](#), the UN Environment Programme calls for countries to use data on food waste to guide national strategies on preventing the problem.

The UN's Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) says at least a third of food globally is lost or wasted along the food supply chain, between being harvested and sold to consumers.

Recent initiatives to help combat this include the creation of a [Food Waste Reduction and Management Task Force in Rwanda](#) in Africa, where more than 15% of the population does not have enough food to eat.

One of the World Economic Forum's initiatives is the [Food Waste Challenge](#), a yearly competition to source ideas to tackle food waste in households, businesses and society as a whole.

Winning ideas receive €5,000 in funding to further develop their proposal.

Technology like the internet of things – the world of connected devices – is helping retailers [manage and improve the freshness of food](#). Consumers can also use smartphone apps to [stop unused, but still edible, food going to landfill](#).

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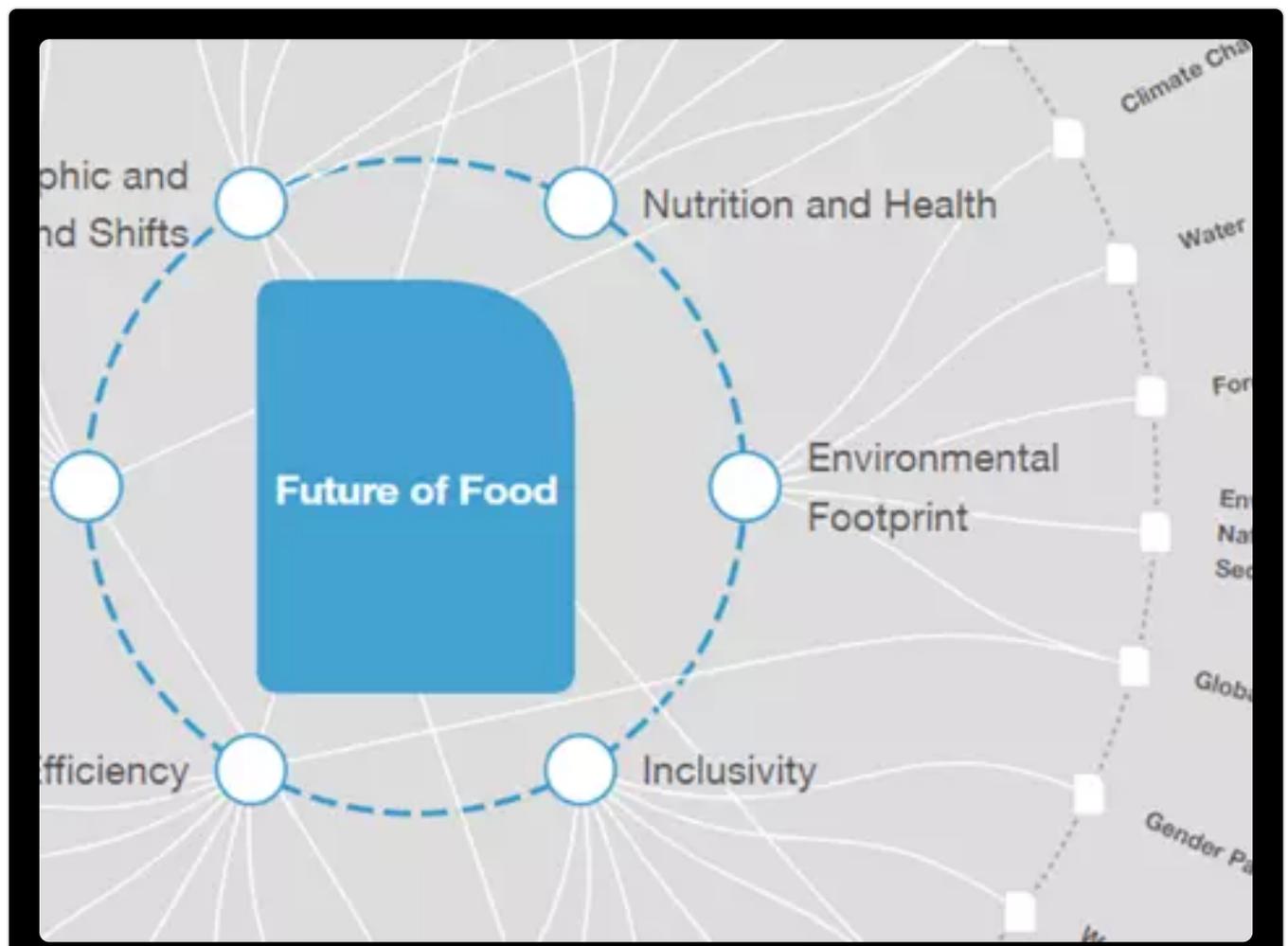
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