



# A FOOD LOSS AND WASTE WORKSHOP on Date Labelling



IN COLLABORATION WITH:



## SUMMARY OF DISCUSSIONS

***On June 7, 2018 the National Zero Waste Council, in collaboration with Provision Coalition and ReFED, hosted a food loss and waste workshop on date labelling. Non-standardized food labels in Canada are causing confusion amongst consumers, and contribute to food loss and waste (FLW) throughout the supply chain including at the point of processing, manufacturing, retail and consumption. The Consumer Goods Forum along with Champions 12.3 have issued a call to action to simplify date labels and reduce food waste by 2020, advocating for the use of only one label at a time, two labels with specific wording to choose from, and consumer education to better understand what the date labels mean.***

*How are Canadian businesses and government agencies responding to this call for action? What changes are being considered in the Canadian context that might best align with action taking place in other jurisdictions including the US? How can date labelling changes be accelerated in Canada, and what is needed by businesses and governments to support implementation? Are there local leaders that have experience with implementing changes within their supply chains and what can we learn from them? These questions and more were explored in the workshop, as part of a strategic, collaborative initiative in support of date labelling changes in Canada.*

### Workshop Agenda

- Introductions and Setting the Context *Denise Philippe, NZWC Secretariat*
- Food Waste, Labelling and the Value Chain *Simone Weinstein, Provision Coalition*

- Guidelines and Toolkits: aligning North American action *Jackie Suggitt, REFED*
- Plenary Discussion – questions on the presentations.
- Table Discussions
- Next Steps

## Summary of Table Discussions

**Question 1: What challenges and issues face businesses when changing date labelling practices?** Consider **who** needs to be involved (in a business and throughout the supply chain), and **how** can progress be tracked and measured?

- Nutrition labels are standardized. We similarly need standardized best before labels.
- A standard for reconstituted food is needed – currently, every company does it differently
- More consistency is required – in the format of the labels, but also in determining the length of shelf life (manufacturers are setting it to maximize sales).
- The determination of shelf life length should be regulated.
- For any changes that are made to best before date labels, there may be a challenge effectively communicating these changes down the line.
- Third party audits for food safety are often delivering penalties for food without best before date labels, or food that is past a best before date. This is contrary to the interest in having fewer products (that have long shelf lives) with date labels, or selling/preparing food beyond a best before date. The audit criteria/requirements are out of date/out of step with emerging changes to understanding and practice around best before date labels. There is a need to understand where these requirements/criteria come from – and to update them.
- There are challenges around knowing what dates need to be targeted, and understanding what the different dates really mean. There is no standard around the date received at a retailer, and the date repackaged and labelled for the consumer.
- There are financial incentives to buying in bulk – it is cheaper than buying non-bulk and so more is purchased. The result is greater waste (as products are disposed of when they reach the best before date), but money is saved (in the short run). Changes to date labelling would better serve these bulk purchases.
- Front-line staff are often assigning and applying best before dates to food products that are being re-packaged for sale. However, too often staff do not have the appropriate knowledge to make good decisions/good judgements around what dates these labels should carry (not enough knowledge about shelf life longevity, etc.)
- One of the biggest challenges upstream are retailers' shelf life request.
- Consumer demand for dates that help them buy the freshest food available presents an ongoing hurdle.
- Banquet food that hits a table can't be labelled and distributed. This is an example of where best before date labels would be helpful.

- The value of best before date labels is limited. However, knowing how to best store food (ex. recommended length of time to freeze meat), and how to prep, pull, and par will mean more accurately measured food, both of which are important and would lead to less waste. This is not wide-spread knowledge. The aquarium has prepared these info sheets.
- Food safety training doesn't go into storage and labelling (how best to ...) – but it should!
- There is the need to verify, for liability purposes, the chain of custody of all food (e.g. hospitals, vulnerable people)
- Best before dates compound the challenge that organizations with changing consumers (e.g. tourism and hospital organizations) have with predicting their clientele's preferences.
- Different types of labels can be bought – some printed with text, others without text; different colours, styles, materials. This adds to the challenge of consistent formatting for date and language.
- The cost of 're-tooling' by manufacturers in order to standardize will be a challenge
- Establishing consistency, standardization, between/amongst manufacturers and retailers (format, length of time, etc.) will be a challenge.
- The question is how to regulate best before date labels? Who has the authority? (e.g. imported foods)
- The fear of legal liability; reputational risk, media/public perception, ... will present challenges to changing date labels
- Bulk commercial kitchen buys are different from consumer purchases (there is often a requirement to purchase large quantities at a time). Labelling and brand standards dictate what is allowed and if the product isn't 'good enough'/'appropriate enough', it will be returned and thrown away. Changes in menus (changes in events, etc.) can also affect what food is required – best before date labels contribute to waste in that they limit how long a product can be held on to, to be used at a later time when the menu is adjusted once again.

*Who needs to be involved?*

- People that need to be involved in making change, or understanding what changes could be/should be implemented and why, include: regulatory bodies, health inspectors, third party auditors (some of which are currently penalizing organizations/businesses if they find food products *without* date labels on them) distributors.
- Retailers, and food banks. Even consumers need to be better engaged on this issue.
- Supplier accountability will be the way to drive change – and it will require picking up the phone to make demands direct, clear.
- Tourism and hospital organizations face significant challenges, and it will be critical to involve them

**Question 2: What actions need to be taken to move forward changes to date labelling so there is less confusion, less food waste?**

- Updating of requirements/criteria used by third party auditors, and training provided to auditors

- Training for front line staff who are applying date labels.
- Move to automated labels, instead of manual labels. This would reduce front line staff error.
- Provide recommendations for best practices around storage and rotation (e.g. how long can a roast be frozen for; etc. This will be more helpful than a best before date label).
- More flexibility in commercial purchasing of food products
- Split cases of food bought between different parts of our organization to reduce the amount brought in and wasted. Also, manage order guides – this will give greater flexibility in case sizes.
- Concerns around the limitations of date labels and how they should be changed need to be more widely shared with government authorities; and there needs to be significant awareness-raising with consumers and industry through mechanisms such as social media/media in general/other.
- **Standardize, regulate, educate** – standardize (government and industry), regulate (government with industry input), and educate (consumers)
- Bring Health Canada to the table, and make best before date labels (format for year, month, day) standardized - similar to nutrition labels.
- Build public awareness and pressure to force change
- There needs to be a collective of large manufacturers, retailers, and government who are working together to implement changes
- Work with suppliers to establish different formats, and keep them accountable for best before dates. Enhance the ability to turn away supplies that have short best before dates.
- Ensure there are standardized labels from manufacturers to retail.

## Summary of Next Steps

In our discussion of next steps, there was strong agreement in the room that more was needed immediately to deal with the issue. There was a request that more workshops such as the one just completed be held in other parts of the country. There was also a request to hold a stakeholder forum with political, business and NGO leaders. While broad consultation was led by CFIA through its Food Labelling Modernization Initiative on changes to food labels, only a portion of that addressed best before dates. A deeper dive on the issue of best before date labelling is required.

Workshop participants identified the following as important next steps:

- Hold a separate stakeholder meeting with (specifically) large retailers / businesses (and establish a performance indicator argument for change)
- Hold a stakeholder forum with political, business and NGO leadership representation
- Leverage messages about the climate impact of food waste
- Educate consumers via media channels
- Increase the number of workshops around best before date labelling
- Understand and enhance food safety auditor education on best before date labels
- Incorporate best before label education in food safety education
- Create/share storage and rotation guidelines

**On behalf of the National Zero Waste Council and co-hosts Provision Coalition and ReFED, we thank all those who attended the workshop.** Follow up to the workshop is being considered. In the meantime, we encourage businesses and organizations to consider how they can make changes internally that will help reduce the waste of food as a result of best before date labels.

**If there are any questions on the summary of discussion captured above, please contact [admin@nzwc.ca](mailto:admin@nzwc.ca).**