

# Japan throws out 620,000 tons of food a year, while 3 mil kids don't have enough to eat

Mar. 16 06:00 am JST

It's a shocking anomaly. Japan trashes 6.21 million tons of perfectly edible food each year while, also in Japan, an estimated 3 million children don't have enough to eat.

Josei Seven (March 22) takes up the issue of "food loss." It could almost be called food sabotage. It's an old problem, and one wonders how it can have been permitted to persist so long. The answer seems to be that flaws are engrained so deeply into the system as to appear unchallengeable. The magazine is pleased to note that at least that seems to be changing. Slowly, measures are taking shape to put matters right.

The 6.21 million ton figure is the agricultural ministry's for the year 2017. It works out, Josei Seven says, to the amount of food the 13 million residents of Tokyo consume in a year; or, alternatively, to twice the annual amount of food aid the developed world extends to developing nations. More than half the waste – 3.39 million tons – is discarded by the food industry: producers, supermarkets and restaurants. Households account for the remainder.

Japanese consumers are often described as "finicky," insisting on perfect appearance of produce and iron-clad guarantees of freshness and safety. The law backs them up and reinforces this attitude. The history goes back to the immediate postwar period, when sanitation was wretched and disease widespread. The Food Sanitation Law designed to combat that was as strict as experts at the time felt it had to be, and no one ever since has thought of relaxing it. One result is a use-by or sell-by date system that is

more rigorous – and taken more seriously by consumers – than equivalents in most other countries.

Journalist Rumi Ide, who has written extensively on the issue, tells the magazine of the “one-third rule” – a rule of thumb rather than a law, but an industry standard. The time between production and consumption is divided into thirds. First third: delivery. Second third: sale to consumer. Third third: disposal.

Consider a snack item with a shelf life of six months. During the first two months it would go from producer to wholesalers, leaving two months for shipment to retailers, who have two months to get it to you and me. It unnecessarily rushes the process. Snacks don't go bad so fast. The U.S. system allows twice as much time, the UK's 1.25 times as much.

Another industry convention Ide cites is a penalty system for short deliveries. If a wholesaler or retailer orders 100 items and the producer only delivers 80, the seller will demand compensation for the profits that would have accrued from the 100, had they been on hand. This puts pressure on producers to over-produce, to say nothing of the incentive it gives sellers to over-order. The overall result is more production than can be consumed. This fills trash cans.

Recycling of food waste is one possible solution, but facilities are few. What there is of recycling ends up feeding pigs for the most part. But 80 percent of food waste is incinerated, not recycled, and Koichi Takahashi, director of the recycle facility Japan Food Ecology Center in Kanagawa Prefecture, wonders how taxpayers would feel if they knew that 2 trillion yen per year goes to feed the incinerators that consume perfectly edible food.

The failure in Japan of the humble doggy bag to take root is another problem. Americans and Europeans unable to finish a restaurant meal take the remainder home with them. Japanese don't – at least haven't. That's changing. Attractive packaging helps, and restaurants are slowly catching

on.

The estimate of 3 million hungry children is based on health ministry statistics for 2015, which show 13.9 percent of Japanese kids living below the poverty line. If more unsold, uneaten but edible and healthy food went to food banks instead of the incinerator via the trash can, poverty would cease to mean malnutrition. Second Harvest Japan, incorporated as an NPO in 2002, is Japan's first food bank. In 2016, Josei Seven says, it turned some 2000 tons of prematurely trashed food into 4.7 million meals.

© Japan Today