

From the pages of [Produce Business UK](#)

There's no denying food waste is a massive issue for our planet. Roughly one-third of the food produced globally for human consumption, which amounts to approximately 1.3 billion tons, gets lost or wasted every year, according to [Food and Agriculture Organization numbers](#) from the United Nations.

The food that is wasted amounts to roughly US\$680 billion (bn) in industrialized countries and US\$310bn in developing countries, with fruit and vegetables plus roots and tubers having the highest wastage rates of any food industry.

When it comes to minimizing this level of waste in the U.K. fresh produce industry, [FareShare](#) is one of the leading lights and the country's biggest charity in terms of fighting hunger and food waste. And Jo Dyson, FareShare's head of food, utilized her presentation at this year's [London Produce Show and Conference](#) to urge delegates to do more to ensure surplus fruit and vegetables aren't just thrown away, but given to people who really need them.

Making the point that food waste is a "business cost" and that U.K. growers lose money from throwing too much of their product away, Dyson says 10 million tons of food and drink is wasted in the U.K. every year. This, she says, has a value of around £20bn. Interestingly, 270,000 tons of this waste is still edible when it's binned, and this could make a staggering 650 million meals.

"In the U.K. media, there's a lot on how retailers are guilty of food waste and this is true to an extent, but most of the food waste occurs in the home or on a farm," says Dyson.

"Growers, in particular, need to be more aware that the food they give away has enormous value. It really can feed some of our nation's most vulnerable citizens."

Making food waste reduction a part of your brand

This value, according to FareShare, is reflected in the fact that for every £1 you invest in driving down food waste, it will create a net benefit of £14.

According to [data from FMCG giant Unilever](#), 33% of adults would buy a product from a brand because they believe it is doing social or environmental good.

That equates to a €966bn (£817bn) untapped opportunity, given that the size of the marketing for sustainable goods is €2.5tr (£2.1tr). And Dyson says brands that become

pioneers in lowering food waste not only will build a better reputation among consumers, but also “create more profitable businesses.”

Lowering food waste was the most important issue among U.K. shoppers, according to recent FareShare data, when considering supporting a brand.

FareShare works with various retailers such as [Tesco](#), [Sainsbury's](#) and [Asda](#), taking their food waste and redistributing it to charities, who then feed people who are struggling to get by.

“There’s 8.4m people in the U.K. who struggle to afford a meal,” Dyson explains. “There are also 3 million children at risk of hunger over the summer holidays. We work with charities and retailers to ensure the waste that’s still perfectly fine for consumption can really make a difference.”

Following Tesco’s positive progress

Dyson says there have been really positive steps over recent years that suggest the U.K. retail industry is finally starting to take food waste seriously. She pointed to the shining example set by Tesco, one of several major businesses to sign up to the [Courtauld Commitment 2025](#), a voluntary agreement to cut food waste by 20% within a decade.

Tesco has slashed the amount of food going to waste from its operations by nearly a fifth, after introducing new measures to distribute surplus to staff and charity groups. The U.K.’s biggest supermarket recently announced that 44,297 tons of food went to waste in 2018/19, a fall of 17%, with the figure amounting to 0.45% of its sales.

Tesco said it was now 81% of the way towards its target that no food safe for human consumption goes to waste, though it had planned to reach the target by May last year. Its chief executive, Dave Lewis, has urged other businesses to be held accountable and release their food waste data publicly like his own company has done.

Growing waste awareness

Dyson says the success of the U.K.’s biggest supermarket in “combating waste” means others will “naturally follow its example.” Despite this positive backdrop, Dyson admits many business people still don’t understand the scale of the problem or really understand what food waste looks like.

"People don't know what waste is," says Dyson. "If you deal with processing bananas, for example, the skin isn't edible waste, but if you throw the whole banana away, the weight of skin in a whole banana is counted as edible waste. The devil is in the detail, and there are so many different ways for businesses to lower their waste level by being clever.

"Lots of companies don't know where their waste goes either. Most of it goes to aerobic digestion, but they should know that and look to gain more knowledge so they can run the best possible business when it comes to sustainability."

She says businesses also must involve people on the ground more effectively, and that getting waste reduction in your CSR plan is one thing, but actually mobilizing growers to embed this in their day-to-day production is a different matter entirely.

"More must be done to embed laborers and workers in the process as you will be more successful with reducing waste if they feel part of the mission," she added.

Some of the biggest barriers to getting a waste reduction plan off the ground, according to Dyson, include: "added costs for further distribution, cost of processing, cost of time and labor to organize surplus food, and the fact stock is short-dated or lower quality." But Dyson says these are all things that get easier with time and that each is worth persevering with in the long run.

FareShare recently secured a £1.9m grant from the U.K. government's DEFRA and the [Food Waste Reduction Fund](#). This means it can redistribute an additional 18 million meals to charities, and Dyson urged delegates at the London Produce Show to support FareShare over the coming years.

She concluded: "Without their current supply of FareShare food, one in five charities would close down. We feed nearly one million people every week, so it's crucial we work with as many fruit and vegetable producers as possible to ensure their waste is improving the planet.

"Thankfully, more and more are realizing that combating food waste is a necessary business cost."