00;00;00;00 - 00;00;18;12

Alena Poulin

Welcome to FRE Lunch, the official podcast of the Food and Resource Economics department at the University of Florida. I'm Alena Poulin. The marketing and communications specialist for the department.

00;00;18;20 - 00;00;33;06

Caleb Stair

I'm Caleb Stair, assistant instructional professor of Food and Resource Economics and the coordinator for undergraduate research in the Department. Meaning I get to interact regularly with the members of our FRE community and see all the cool and interesting topics being explored.

00;00;33;11 - 00;00;44;29

Alena Poulin

That's why we made this podcast to showcase the many ways students and faculty are using economic research to understand and address the complex issues facing agricultural and natural resource industry.

00;00;45;03 - 00;01;16;06

Caleb Stair

Welcome to 2025 from lunch to landfills. That's right. Today we are talking about food waste. Food waste is an economic and ethical issue because what we are talking about is scarce resources. Food is needed to survive. The food you end up throwing away doesn't just amount to the stale fries on your plate. It is also a waste of the land used to grow the potatoes, the labor employed on the farm, the equipment used to extract or cut up those potatoes.

00;01;16;08 - 00;01;37;16

Caleb Stair

It is the culmination of these things that is represented in that fry you threw away. Ironically, this issue does not exist in a vacuum. At the same time that we are wasting a portion of the food that we produce. There is a subset of individuals who don't actually have access to enough food.

00;01;37;18 - 00;01;57;22

Alena Poulin

All of these factors are why food waste is such an important topic, and why it was chosen for today's episode. Food waste is defined as the edible amount of food post-harvest that is available for human consumption, but not consumed, for some reason. According to the USDA, food waste is between 30 to 40% of the food supply.

00;01;57;27 - 00;02;12;17

Caleb Stair

How bad could that be, you ask? Well, the USDA also says that about half a pound of food per person per day goes uneaten. That's about $372 per person per year wasted.

00;02;12;18 - 00;02;23;20

Alena Poulin

To put that into perspective, if you were a family of four, you would waste 60 pounds of food per month. That's three average, five-foot-long alligator's worth of food.

00;02;23;22 - 00;02;28;20

Caleb Stair

It's as if you ordered a Big Mac each day on the way to work, and just tossed it out the window.

00;02;28;25 - 00;02;32;14

Alena Poulin

Now, obviously, this isn't the most common way that food is wasted.

00;02;32;15 - 00;02;41;03

Caleb Stair

Yes, that loss can occur for many reasons. For example, how many times have you opened up the fridge and found some fuzzy stuff growing on your bell peppers?

00;02;41;08 - 00;02;47;01

Alena Poulin

Or did you make too much food one evening when you were really hungry and ended up tossing out your leftovers?

00;02;47;01 - 00;02;54;06

Caleb Stair

Or did you check the expiration dates on the sauces that line the door of your fridge and realize they expired during Covid?

00;02;54;10 - 00;02;59;23

Alena Poulin

Maybe your pet duck ripped open the package of bread that you had just bought for French toast.

00;02;59;24 - 00;03;01;12

Caleb Stair

You. You have a pet duck.

00;03;01;20 - 00;03;02;23

Alena Poulin

Who's to say?

00;03;02;26 - 00;03;07;10

Caleb Stair

But wait, is that food? Wait. The duck ate the food?

00;03;07;12 - 00;03;18;07

Alena Poulin

Anyway, food waste is a public concern. According to a survey done by YouGov, 55% of individuals considered food waste. Quote, a very big problem.

00;03;18;09 - 00;03;26;03

Caleb Stair

Back in 2015, the USDA joined the EPA to set a goal to cut US food waste by 50% by 2030.

00;03;26;05 - 00;03;35;02

Alena Poulin

Interestingly enough, college aged individuals those that are 18 to 29, were the least likely group surveyed to think that food waste was a major issue.

00;03;35;04 - 00;03;54;23

Caleb Stair

22 million pounds of food is wasted annually on college campuses across the United States, at least according to the National Resources Defense Council. But what about here at the University of Florida? Today we are joined by Matty Kovaleski from Florida Fresh Dining to talk about sustainability and food waste. Matty, thank you for joining us today.

00;03;54;25 - 00;03;56;17

Maddie Kowalewski

Thank you guys for having me.

00;03;56;19 - 00;04;00;22

Caleb Stair

So can you tell us a little bit more about what your role is here at the University?

00;04;00;28 - 00;04;18;17

Maddie Kowalewski

Yeah, yeah. So my technical title is sustainability manager for Florida Fresh Dining. What that basically looks like is I oversee products that surround sometimes sustainable sourcing, product procurement, waste reduction, and interacting with students on all of those kind of things.

00;04;18;20 - 00;04;31;20

Caleb Stair

So this is probably one aspect of a larger issue, which is overall sustainability. How does food waste reduction relate to that larger topic of sustainability goals on campus?

00;04;31;22 - 00;04;53;12

Maddie Kowalewski

By integrating food waste reduction into sustainability efforts, we can establish a campus model that addresses environmental impact and fosters mindful habits. Campus dining services interact with students daily, offering opportunities for education throughout their time at UF. This inspires the campus community to contribute to a sustainable future where every action drives collective change.

00;04;53;14 - 00;05;05;04

Alena Poulin

So Florida is obviously a very big school and there must be lots of different moving parts with regards to providing for all of these different students. How much food does UF provide for its students each year?

00;05;05;06 - 00;05;28;19

Maddie Kowalewski

Yeah, so it's challenging to provide an exact weight in pounds since we order food based on case quantity and cost rather than weight. However, for perspective, we serve over 3000 guests in a single day during the academic year and in one calendar year. Florida fresh dining spent over 8 million on food and beverage purchases, and that figure only accounts for dining locations run by Florida Fresh Dining.

00;05;28;21 - 00;05;32;19

Caleb Stair

That is an awful lot of food. Is food waste the concern on the campus?

00;05;32;21 - 00;05;50;09

Maddie Kowalewski

Yeah, absolutely. Food waste is a concern that we continuously address with new strategies. One of our biggest challenges is building awareness and encouraging students to consider the amount of food waste they generate during a single meal. We've explored several approaches to building awareness and inspiring behavioral change in the campus community.

00;05;50;12 - 00;05;56;15

Caleb Stair

These food waste reduction initiatives at UF are varied and date back as far as 2008.

00;05;56;17 - 00;06;12;20

Maddie Kowalewski

UF has a long history in addressing food waste, starting as an early campus adopter of trayless dining starting in 2008. Without trays, students can only carry two items at a time instead of piling on 4 or 5 items, which helps to minimize food waste from over serving.

00;06;12;23 - 00;06;21;16

Alena Poulin

According to Matty, this simple change has saved more than 30,000 pounds in food waste per year over the last 16 years.

00;06;21;17 - 00;06;31;21

Caleb Stair

Composting is another strategy that the university has employed to take what would have been food waste, and instead turn it into nutrient rich compost. That can be used to grow more food.

00;06;31;26 - 00;06;49;14

Maddie Kowalewski

Since 2014, the dining halls on campus compost, food scraps from the dish return, and any scraps and trimmings generated during the food preparation process. These steps help us ensure that waste is diverted from landfills, where it can add to greenhouse gas emissions and put to better use, such as creating nutrient rich compost.

00;06;49;17 - 00;07;16;19

Caleb Stair

Overall, you have set an ambitious goal to eliminate 90% of University of Florida waste from landfills. Yes, this includes bottles, cans and other recyclables, but since the program started, over 300,000 tons of organics and food waste have been diverted from landfills through our composting initiative. You have collected this waste from dining facilities like Gator Corner, the restaurants in the Reitz Union and even the Harikrishna lunch service.

00;07;16;20 - 00;07;36;13

Alena Poulin

This semester, a new initiative entitled Project Clean Plate was launched to raise awareness about the amount of food waste being generated on campus. The program takes place every Wednesday in the dining halls during the lunch and dinner. The times and locations alternate weekly to reach as many of our students as possible.

00;07;36;15 - 00;07;47;06

Caleb Stair

Matty also told us these events are a great opportunity to engage students in meaningful conversations about food waste, and encourage them to take small steps towards reducing it in their daily lives.

00;07;47;13 - 00;08;08;08

Maddie Kowalewski

One of our biggest challenges is building awareness and encouraging students to consider the amount of food waste they generate during a single meal. We've explored several approaches to building awareness and inspiring behavioral change in the campus community. Project Clean Plate is established to encourage students to clean their plate. It promotes the idea of taking only what you plan to eat.

00;08;08;10 - 00;08;31;18

Maddie Kowalewski

The program offers both short term and long term incentives, and the short term students can receive giveaways such as reusable metal straws or travel cutlery sets. For long term engagement, students use a punch card that, when filled, enters them into a raffle for prizes like, you know, hammocks or waterproof speakers. Our dining halls operate on an all you care to eat model, allowing guests to take as much or as little as they like.

00;08;31;21 - 00;08;55;08

Maddie Kowalewski

Because of this, much of the responsibility for reducing waste falls on individual behavior. To address this, our team focuses on educating both our guests and our associates. For example, we train associates to use standard scoop sizes to avoid over serving, but there's only so much we can control as producers. Changing habits and behaviors requires a collective effort, and we aim to empower students to be mindful about their choices.

00;08;55;11 - 00;09;01;26

Caleb Stair

That's a good point. It does seem like education is probably the most, or one of the most effective ways of reducing food waste.

00;09;02;02 - 00;09;08;20

Alena Poulin

Project Clean Plate is not the only education based waste reduction strategy that Maddie and the Florida Fresh Dining

00;09;08;20 - 00;09;09;02

Alena Poulin

team

00;09;09;02 - 00;09;09;25

Alena Poulin

have employed,

00;09;09;25 - 00;09;12;02

Alena Poulin

aiming to encourage behavioral change.

00;09;12;02 - 00;09;15;09

Alena Poulin

Since becoming the sustainability manager in 2022,

00;09;15;09 - 00;09;18;10

Alena Poulin

Maddie said she's organized about 20 different events.

00;09;18;10 - 00;09;40;04

Caleb Stair

Each of those events has drawn about 15 to 80 guests who actively attend or engage during the hour to hour and a half these events run, 300 to 400 guests typically pass through the dining hall at peak engagement. About one out of every four of these diners are actively participating, and there has been a noticeable change in these participants attitudes and behaviors.

00;09;40;07 - 00;10;04;24

Maddie Kowalewski

I've noticed a growing curiosity among students about food waste reduction. More students are asking questions, engaging in conversations, and showing interest in how they can contribute to sustainability efforts. I've had the opportunity to speak in several classes on the topic, and even attend conferences where food waste reduction is a key focus. These experiences show that people are thinking about food waste, but the challenge often lies and in figuring out the next steps.

00;10;04;27 - 00;10;15;26

Maddie Kowalewski

While our dishes have been effective in sparking awareness and encouraging mindfulness, there's still work to be done and helping students and the campus community translate that awareness into consistent, sustainable actions.

00;10;15;27 - 00;10;38;23

Caleb Stair

I agree, I teach a couple of classes at the university and it really seems like students are paying attention to how much food we produce, how much we consume, where the waste goes. So it does seem to be a topic that is, let's say, on the minds of the students at UF. What is to you at least? What is student attitudes or awareness about food waste at UF?

00;10;38;25 - 00;11;01;17

Maddie Kowalewski

Student attitudes and awareness about food waste are mixed. Some guests show genuine interest in learning more and actively engage in conversation at events or tabling sessions, and they're curious about how they can contribute to reducing food waste and are open to making changes in their routines. On the other hand, some students view the topic as an inconvenience to their daily lives and they are less inclined to participate.

00;11;01;20 - 00;11;21;27

Maddie Kowalewski

I've encountered a range of reactions some students approach because they truly want to learn. Others stop by for giveaways, and a few completely ignore the efforts altogether. It's a reminder that while food waste reduction is an important topic, building awareness and inspiring behavioral change requires ongoing outreach and creative ways to connect with the campus community.

00;11;21;29 - 00;11;30;00

Caleb Stair

So speaking of connecting to the greater campus community, what do you want the wider UF community to know about this particular topic?

00;11;30;02 - 00;11;56;00

Maddie Kowalewski

One of the most impactful steps to reducing food waste is practicing mindful eating and communicating your needs. Whether asking for portions that align with your appetite or letting associates know your preferences. Another key part is tuning into your body's natural hunger cues and listening to your body. Am I still hungry? Does my stomach feel comfortably full? Did this meal satisfy me by taking smaller portions first and pausing to check in?

00;11;56;02 - 00;12;06;07

Maddie Kowalewski

You can honor your body's needs while reducing food waste. These mindful and intentional actions can help to connect with your body and contribute to a more sustainable campus.

00;12;06;09 - 00;12;09;02

Alena Poulin

And so with that, we've reached the end of today's episode.

00;12;09;05 - 00;12;22;07

Caleb Stair

I hope you all didn't find that a waste of your time. If you're interested in learning more about UF's sustainability initiatives or other things along those lines, we'll have those links in the description.

00;12;22;08 - 00;12;36;14

Alena Poulin

If you're interested in learning more about different techniques that have been used on college campuses to reduce food waste. Be sure to tune in to our bonus episode that will be releasing with Dr. Oleysa Savchenko, an assistant professor of food and resource economics in our department.

00;12;36;14 - 00;12;43;17

Alena Poulin

About her previous research on the subject. The best approach to reducing food loss and waste is, of course, not to create it in the first place.

00;12;43;19 - 00;12;46;11

Caleb Stair

Whether that means more leftovers.

00;12;46;11 - 00;12;48;09

Alena Poulin

Or choosing food that lasts longer.

00;12;48;10 - 00;12;50;16

Caleb Stair

Or sharing it with your friends.

00;12;50;19 - 00;12;54;11

Alena Poulin

We can all do a little bit. That makes a big difference.

00;12;54;13 - 00;13;14;00

Caleb Stair

If you've made it this far, you've finished the entire episode and we thank you for that. Tune in next time for more food for thought. Thanks again for joining us on this episode of FRE Lunch. We hope you'll come back again for seconds.