

Do Australians waste \$8 billion worth of edible food each year?



PHOTO: [FoodWise says Australians throw out \\$8 billion worth of edible food every year. ABC Fact Check finds the figure stacks up.](#) (AFP: Patrick Pleul)

Australians might love a good meal – but if you believe the claims of [FoodWise](#), a national campaign run by not-for-profit group DoSomething, the amount we throw away is staggering. "Aussies throw out \$8 billion worth of edible food every year," it says.

[OzHarvest](#), a charity which collects food from businesses which would otherwise be discarded, uses a similar figure. "Australians throw away food worth \$7.8 billion a year," it says.

Eight billion dollars is a lot of money. It's double the [Federal Government's commitment to foreign aid](#) this financial year. As Australia's largest food festival [Good Food Month](#) gets underway across the country, ABC Fact Check takes a look at whether the figure is accurate.

- **The claim:** FoodWise says Australians throw out \$8 billion worth of edible food every year.
- **The verdict:** Based on the available research, the claim stacks up. But the \$8 billion only relates to household food waste. The total value of food waste in Australia would far exceed this figure.

FoodWise has used a [food waste avoidance study](#) by the NSW Government to reach its figure. OzHarvest sources its figure from FoodWise.

The NSW Government study was conducted in 2009 in the form of an online survey. It was completed by 1,200 NSW residents aged 16 and older. It found that NSW households on average throw away \$1,036 worth of edible food each year.

Participants were asked to "estimate the dollar value of each type of food your household purchases but throws away without being consumed (including going into the compost, worm farm, or fed to pets)". The breakdown was as follows:

Food type	Yearly waste	Weekly waste
Fresh food	\$343	\$6.60
Leftovers	\$281	\$5.40
Packaged/long-life	\$151	\$2.90

Food type	Yearly waste	Weekly waste
Drinks	\$94	\$1.80
Frozen food	\$94	\$1.80
Home delivered/take away	\$73	\$1.40
Total	\$1,036	\$19.90

The study found people aged 18 to 24 and households with incomes over \$100,000 throw away the most food. The two main reasons for the waste were food being left in the fridge or freezer too long and people not finishing their meals.

FoodWise took the \$1,036 figure and multiplied it by the number of households across Australia - [7,760,320 according to the Australian Bureau of Statistics](#) - to reach \$8 billion.

Other research

Sustainability Victoria, a statutory authority with a board appointed by state environment minister, conducted a [food waste avoidance study](#) in 2010 which surveyed more than 1,200 households across the state. The study found households in Victoria estimate they spend more than \$2,000 a year on food that is wasted - almost double the NSW figure of \$1,036. The study found 18 to 24 year olds and households with incomes of more than \$130,000 a year are the state's biggest wasters.

A [policy brief by think tank The Australia Institute](#), published in 2009, concluded that "Australians are throwing away food worth \$5.2 billion a year". It conducted an online survey of 1,603 grocery buyers across Australia. It found NSW households throw out an estimated \$643 worth of edible food each year, while households in Victoria throw out an estimated \$560. It also found households with higher incomes were the biggest food wasters.

ABC Fact Check asked the researchers why their annual household food waste values for NSW and Victoria were so much less than the estimates in the NSW Government and Sustainability Victoria food waste avoidance studies. Dr Richard Denniss, the institute's executive director, said the \$5.2 billion figure in the study was a "conservative estimate" because it only asked people about specific types of food that they threw out. "It included major sources of waste, but did not capture all food waste," Dr Denniss said.

Kerbside bin audits

Another method of measuring household food waste is bin auditing. In NSW, a 2007-08 audit of the greater Sydney region found food made up [40.3 per cent of bin waste](#). That was based on audits of 51 households.

In Victoria, an audit of 600 randomly selected bins across metropolitan Melbourne was conducted in May 2008. It found food waste accounted for [41 per cent](#) of the contents of those bins.

And in South Australia, an audit of the city of Burnside looked at more than 200 bins from May to June 2013. In this study, food accounted for [42 per cent](#) of waste bin materials.

A [National Food Waste Assessment](#) was prepared by the University of Technology Sydney for the federal government in June 2011. In terms of household waste audit data, it found "there is a high level of variability in the methodology used in different states and territories,

at different times". However, it noted that NSW and SA data is among the most reliable, as "methodologies for undertaking such audits have been in place for longer periods".

Reaching the \$8 billion figure

FoodWise's claim - that Australians throw out \$8 billion worth of edible food every year - uses the NSW figure - that NSW households throw away \$1,036 worth of edible food each year - as the basis for its calculations. But the calculation assumes households in other states and territories waste the same amount of food as those in NSW.

Christian Reynolds, from [CQUniversity's Food Waste Project Team](#), says the calculation is safe because while waste habits vary from state to state, "NSW is the middle of the road in terms of household recycling practices". He cites figure 2.9 in the [2010 National Waste Report](#), prepared by the national Environment Protection and Heritage Council, which shows NSW sitting just below the national average in terms of waste generated by households and councils.

To further test whether the NSW figure can safely be used as the basis for a national one, Fact Check looked into where NSW sits in terms of its percentage of young people and rich people compared to the rest of Australia. Age and income were chosen, as the above studies highlight them to be key drivers of household food waste.

Australian Bureau of Statistics figures on [Household Income and Income Distribution for 2011-12](#) show Tasmania, South Australia and Victoria have disposable household incomes below the national average. The ACT, WA and the NT have the highest average incomes. NSW recorded an average household weekly income only 2 per cent above the national average, which the ABS says is "not a statistically significant difference".

In terms of young people, [ABS figures from June 2010](#) show NSW to have slightly fewer 18 to 24 year olds (as a percentage of the state's total population) than the national average.

Non-household food waste

Food thrown away by households makes up only a portion of Australia's total food waste. The National Food Waste Assessment identified several stages at which food waste occurs including pre-farm gate (agricultural production), farm gate to check out and check out to consumer. The latter category can be broken down again, into food waste by supermarkets, other commercial and industrial outlets and finally, consumers. Residential food waste falls into the consumer category.

The verdict

Based on the available research, the claim that Australians throw out \$8 billion worth of edible food every year stacks up. But this figure only relates to household food waste. The total value of food waste in Australia, including commercial waste from restaurants and supermarkets, would far exceed this figure.

Sources

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