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## Literature Review

Dates found on food labels can be confusing to the consumers. Food labels may have use by, best by or best before, sell by or may have an expiration date. But do these dates refer to quality or safety? The average consumer may be confused by these dates and may throw perfectly good food away. It's time to stop wasting so much and clear up the confusion about food date labels.

### U.S. Food Waste

In 2008, the total food loss value at retail and consumer levels was \$165.6 billion. The top food groups were meat, poultry, and fish (41%), vegetables (17%), and dairy (14%). This dollar amount translates to 273lbs. For consumers, the loss was \$936 per year or \$2.56 per day.

### Misunderstanding of Food Date Labels Leads to Increased Food Waste

According to PBS.org, "Americans trash an estimated 40% of viable food—upwards of 160 billion pounds per year—and misunderstandings about food date label comprises 20% of consumer food waste." "84% of consumers at least occasionally discard food close to or past the date on its package", according to the study, Consumer Perceptions of Date Labels: A National Study. Consumers do not always understand the difference between the terms "use by", "sell by", "best if used by", "best if used before", and "expires on."

### Expiration Dates and the Environment

These dates and terminology on labels may actually be contributing to an environmental issue by encouraging consumers to throw away food. A survey conducted by the Harvard Food Law and Policy Clinic found that more than one third of surveyor's usually or always throw away food that's past it date label, while eighty-four percent said occasionally. This waste, according to the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization, has contributed 3 billion tons of carbon dioxide to the carbon footprint.

### What Food Date Labels Actually Mean

There are two types of food product dating, open and closed. Open dating refers to a date given to the product by the manufacturer or retailer. This date gives the consumer an estimate on the best quality and to help the store with shelf life. Closed dating is a series of letters and numbers given to the product by manufacturers to identify the time and date of production. **There** are no federal laws for food product dating except for infant formula. For meat, poultry, and egg products, FSIS says that dates are voluntarily applied as long as it is in a manner that is truthful and not misleading consumers. To comply with FSIS regulations, the date must have a month and day on the label. A year is only required with frozen products. They also require the date to have one of the phrases describing it's meaning.

According to the Food Safety Inspection Service, a wide variety of terms are used because there is not a Federal standard. According to the Food Product Dating Fact Sheet, the most commons terms are "use by"

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“sell by”, and “best if used by” or “best if used before”. Their definitions are as follows

““Best if Used By/Before" indicates when a product will be of best flavor or quality. It is not a purchase or safety date. A "Sell-By" date tells the store how long to display the product for sale for inventory management. It is not a safety date. A "Use-By" date is the last date recommended for the use of the product while at peak quality. It is not a safety date except for when used on infant formula.” (fsis.usda.gov)

### Food Safety vs. Food Quality

As stated above, only infant formula is regulated by federal law and use by is when the product is no longer safe. States may have their own laws regarding food labeling, but it varies from state to state. For example, Montana has milk throw away 12 days after pasteurization, where other states, the date on the label is around 3 weeks after pasteurization. The problem with milk is over time, it reacts with light, and eventually have an off flavor- a quality issues. The milk would still be safe to drink due to the pasteurization process.

With most food, the date on them refers to quality and what the manufacturer wants you know about its product. Foods will have a peak quality and then the product beings to decline, which is what most dates are referring to. Foods that need an actual expiration date (that date when you should not consume the food for fear of illness) would be foods that are not cooked prior to consumption, such as deli meats or pre-made sandwiches. These have a risk of bacterial exposure, whereas most other foods will not. Just because a food gets old, doesn't mean it will spontaneously grow bacteria to make you sick.