



IFAC Statement on European Commission's Market Study on Date Marking and Other Information Provided on Food Labels and Food Waste Prevention

In February 2018, the European Commission (EC) released a [study](#) investigating the relationship between date marking on food labels and food waste. The overall objective of the study was to help inform the European Union (EU) of actions it can take to help mitigate food waste, which is substantial in the EU and globally. It took a closer look at how date labeling practices are used by food businesses and authorities, and how they are interpreted by consumers and potentially lead to food waste.

Researchers found that up to 10 percent of the 88 million tons of food waste generated by the EU annually is linked to date marking, presumably due to widespread confusion around how to interpret dates on food labels. Of avoidable food waste based on date labels, the study found that the top products wasted were yogurt (70 percent), eggs (59 percent), cooking sauces (59 percent), and cakes and desserts (28 percent).

Date marking practices were originally introduced by supermarkets to help ensure the freshness of foods and optimize stock control. Today, the intended audience has shifted to consumers, and, in accordance with European regulationsⁱ, most packaged foods in the EU display a date and accompanying language to indicate whether the date represents a safety threshold (“use by”) or the point after which quality would likely be diminished (“best before”). However, there is flexibility in how a “best before” date is indicated depending on the length of the product’s shelf life.

The study found variations in how manufacturers made decisions to use certain language. For example, producers of products with longer shelf lives, such as ketchup, tended to use “best before” on the premise of “microbiological stability”, whereas manufacturers of foods with shorter shelf lives, such as dairy products, tended to employ “use by” dates based on food safety. In addition, the study notes that producers are influenced by common date marking practices used in national markets, and consumer preferences or expectations.

While manufacturers often rely on consumer preferences for date marking practices, there is significant evidence that many consumers fundamentally don’t understand how to interpret date marks. The study references a major [survey](#) previously commissioned by the EC which found that while a majority of EU consumers (58 percent) consider “use by” and “best before” dates when shopping and preparing meals, only 47 percent actually understand “best before” labelling and 40 percent understand “use by” labeling. As a result, cautious consumer behavior due to a lack of understanding regarding the safety or quality of a product can lead to the disposal of products despite still being fit for consumption.

The study notes that a possible solution to reducing this problem is extending the product life of foods. While this can be done by revising existing expiration dates, shelf life can also be extended with ingredients, such as xanthan gum or sodium phosphate. For example, as shown in Table 4, extending product life by one extra day would save 16,000 tons (approximately 35,264,000 pounds) of bread annually.



Based on the study findings, the authors suggest food waste linked to date marking would be reduced if:

- Date marks are present and legible, with clear meaning;
- Consumers have a good understanding of date labelling (notably the distinction between “use by” – as an indicator of safety - and “best before” – as an indicator of quality);
- “Use by” dates are used only where there is a safety-based rationale for doing so, consistent with the FIC Regulation;
- The product life stated on the packaging is consistent with the findings of safety and quality tests; and/or
- There is a level of consistency in storage of food at retail and guidance for consumers regarding the temperatures at which products should be stored in the home.

Misunderstandings regarding date labeling terminology and appropriate responses to date marks can lead to wasted food. Although this study is intended to inform actions of the EU, its findings and recommendations can be applied internationally to all consumers, retailers and manufacturers. The International Food Additives Council (IFAC) endorses the EU’s efforts to shed light on the global issue of food waste, and is committed to advocating for food practices and ingredients that can help the food manufacturing industry and consumers prevent it. IFAC supports continued cooperation and innovation amongst all those involved in the food supply chain in preventing food waste and its related impacts on human and environmental health.

Learn more about the types of food ingredients used to ensure the safety and sustainability of foods [here](#).

ⁱ Official Journal of the European Union. (2011). *Regulation (EU) No 1169/2011 on Food Information to Consumers*. <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:32011R1169&from=EN>.