



EUROPEAN COMMISSION
DIRECTORATE-GENERAL FOR HEALTH AND FOOD SAFETY
Food sustainability, international relations
Farm to fork strategy

DRAFT SUMMARY REPORT

**EU PLATFORM ON FOOD LOSSES AND FOOD WASTE
SUB-GROUP ON DATE MARKING AND FOOD WASTE PREVENTION**

DG HEALTH AND FOOD SAFETY (SANTE)

Microsoft Teams

5 July 2022 – From 11:00 to 15:30

Co-chairs: Ms Anne-Laure-Gassin, DG SANTE and Ms Estelle Herszenhorn, WRAP

Commission: RTD

Member States represented (18): BE, BG, CZ, DE, DK, GR, EE, ES, FI, FR, HU, IE, LU, LV, NL, PT, RO, SE

Private sector organisations (14): BEUC - The European Consumer Organization, BOROUME, COGECA - European Agri-cooperatives, COPA - European Farmers, DUH – Deutsche Umwelthilfe e.V., ECSLA - European Cold Storage and Logistics Association, EURO COOP - European Community of Consumer Co-operatives, EUROCOMMERCE, FOODCLOUD, FOODDRINKEUROPE, INDEPENDENT RETAIL EUROPE, MATVETT-NORSUS-NOFIMA CONSORTIUM, STOP WASTING FOOD MOVEMENT DENMARK, TOO GOOD TO GO, WUR - Wageningen University & Research, WRAP - Waste and Resources Action Programme

Public entities: FAO

Observer: Norway

Invited: Matsentralen Norge - Food Banks Norway

1. Introduction

The DG SANTE co-chair opened the meeting by introducing the co-chair from WRAP and referring to the [mandate](#) of the date marking sub-group, in particular the objectives, the key topics to be discussed in this forum, possible deliverables and the co-chairing calendar of meetings. Following a short introduction of WRAP's work on date labelling and food waste prevention, the co-chair presented the main focus areas of the sub-group in its first year, based on members' feedback collected through the surveys¹, which fall under two main topics: **date marking practices and improving understanding and use of date marking to support behavioural change**. The co-chairs opened the floor for discussion on these topics.

- **Denmark's** study suggests that consumers' understanding of date marking is often affected by risk perception, which influences discarding behaviour even if the meaning of the date marking is well understood. Denmark proposed that this angle should be considered in the work of the sub-group. WRAP referred to similar findings from consumer research carried out in the UK and invited Denmark to present their work in the upcoming sub-group meeting.
- **Stop Wasting Food Denmark** asked to further consider the link between food waste behaviour and rising food prices, following a Danish study suggesting people waste less as the cost of living increases. Stop Wasting Food Denmark also inquired whether any studies have investigated how citizens' willingness to eat foods past their 'best before' dates might evolve in the context of rising food prices. Although not related to date marking *per se*, WRAP referred to UK research showing that people wasted less food during the Covid-19 pandemic.
- **DUH** pointed to an outcome of a study showing that some businesses in Germany may set earlier 'best before' dates than products' actual shelf-life for marketing reasons (e.g. to sell products before seasonal holidays). WRAP invited DUH to present the study at the next sub-group meeting. The Commission referred to previous work carried out related to date marking practices by food business operators (e.g. EFSA's scientific advice on date marking, the Platform's recommendations for action etc.)
- **Ireland's** consumer behaviour insights research shows that the public has good understanding of the meaning of both dates, but the main reason for throwing food away is due to an expired 'use by' date. Therefore, recent education campaigns centred on making the most of food before it passes that date. Ireland expressed support for measures that influence consumer behaviour concerning date marking, beyond information-sharing on the meaning of the two dates, in particular supporting more consistent, risk-based approach to date marking by food business operators.
- The **Commission** is preparing a revision of the date marking rules to prevent food waste linked to misunderstanding and/or misuse of these dates. As the legislative process and the implementation of the new rules will take a few years' time, the Commission highlighted the importance of the group's focussing on actions that complement legislative action (e.g. ensuring more consistent date marking practices in the food supply chain).

¹ Platform members were asked to provide feedback on the sub-group's work via two surveys (February and June 2022).

Following the discussion, the co-chair concluded that members agreed with the main focus areas of the sub-group. Further thought would be given as to how to coordinate work on consumer behaviour related to date marking with the sub-group on consumer food waste prevention.

2. Focus area 1: Improving understanding and use of date marking to support behavioural change

2.1 WRAP's latest research on date labels and consumer behaviour by Estelle Herszenhorn, WRAP

WRAP presented the findings of their study on reducing household dairy waste, which considered the impact of changing 'use by' with 'best before' dates and which looked at food waste behaviours at different times in relation with product shelf-life (as the date approaches, on the date and after the date passes). **WRAP** pointed out that unlike other foods, dairy products tend to be thrown out still unopened. The study showed that regardless of respondents' understanding of the meaning of date marking, people rely heavily on their own judgment when it comes to discarding or consuming a food. Furthermore, no significant differences in discarding behaviours have been found between products marked with 'best before' and 'use by' dates. Placing a targeted message on yogurt packaging, for instance, encouraging people to enjoy the product beyond its 'best before' date, showed positive effects on discarding behaviours.

Discussion:

- **COPA-COGECA** highlighted that EU food law is based on risk analysis and that any measure to improve date marking on foods should be done without putting food safety at risk. This is particularly important for foods with high microbiological risk, which must have a clear indication of the expiry date. **WRAP** explained that food businesses have the obligation to apply the correct date marking on their products and **WRAP** does not advocate for changing date labels on all products. In the UK, milk producers who switched from 'use by' to 'best before' dates on their products worked closely with regulatory authorities to ensure that doing so would not jeopardize food safety.
- **Germany** pointed to national studies testing yoghurts after their 'best before' date (up to one month) and found that these products were still safe as regards microbiological hazards. **WRAP** explained that while certain dairy products may bear a 'best before' date in some Member States, this is not the norm in the UK.
- **Sweden** pointed out that the 'best before' date on dairy has been used in Sweden for decades. Furthermore, Sweden recalled that the overall term used for "best before" and "use by" dates is 'date marking' and suggested that in order to prevent misunderstandings, the two dates should not be referred to as 'expiry dates'. **WRAP** agreed that it is important to use the correct terminology.

2.2 Preventing food waste by using visual date marking cues: Tessa Ooijendijk, the Dutch Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality and Hilke Bos-Brouwers, Wageningen Food & Biobased Research

The Netherlands and **WUR** presented work carried out to improve consumer understanding and use of date marking to prevent food waste, including a study conducted by WUR on visual cues to support correct interpretation of date marking. The study concluded that the visual cues had a limited effect on discarding behaviours, while adding additional date marking-related information on foods helped consumers to make the correct decision as regards consumption or discarding, especially for ‘best before’ products. Based on the study’s results, WUR shaped recommendations for the use of visual cues in practice by food business operators and official guidance has also been created by the Dutch government (the guidance is being translated into English and will be shared via the Hub as soon as available).

Discussion:

- **FOODDRINKEUROPE** asked whether the Netherlands had planned any follow-up research on how these visual cues impact consumer behaviour in real life. The Netherlands explained that some of the visual cues are not feasible from a technical point of view. WUR explained that any change in date marking rules should be backed by research on real life impacts on both consumers and food business operators.
- **Denmark** carried out similar research and found out that symbols did not improve consumers’ discarding behaviour, an opposite conclusion to the Dutch study. Denmark proposed to present this study at the next sub-group meeting. WUR clarified that the visual cues from the Dutch research did have an effect for approximately 25% of consumers.

2.3 Improving understanding and use of date marking to support behavioural change - experiences from use of additional labelling by Anne-Grete Haugen, Matvett SA (Norway)

Matvett shared their experience with improving understanding and use of date marking to support behavioural change, including through the use of additional labelling. Date marking is an important action area of the food waste prevention negotiated agreement with industry. Consumer research in Norway shows that longer shelf-life, smart packaging and additional labelling are the most efficient actions to help consumers reduce food waste. Matvett is planning to develop guidance on date marking for both food business operators and consumers in cooperation with national competent authorities and the food industry. Furthermore, they highlighted the role of technology (e.g. use of QR codes) in helping to manage date marking in the supply chain as well as provide food information to consumers.

WRAP commented that similar research studies should be gathered in a common repository to facilitate sharing of learnings among Platform members. Matvett agreed and suggested that the Platform should look at the main causes for food waste generation and share insights in order to

ensure richer discussions on aspects beyond date marking (e.g. packaging, innovative date marking etc.). Moreover, WRAP invited Matvett to present their research on QR codes in a future subgroup meeting.

3. Focus area 2: Date marking practices

3.1 Date label removal for fruit and vegetables - Estelle Herszenhorn, WRAP

WRAP took the floor to present insights from their latest research on the impact of removing date marking from fresh produce on household food waste. Following consumer research, shelf-life testing and modelling of impacts, the study issued three recommendations for food businesses: to sell loose produce, to remove date marking for uncut fresh produce and to provide best practice guidance on storage for consumers.

The Commission presented an overview of the replies to the survey circulated with members ahead of the meeting. The survey included questions on the extent to which uncut fruit and vegetables bear date marking across countries, experiences with removing date marking from fruit and vegetables and the extent to which operators use date marking on foods that are not required to bear a 'best before' date. Replies indicate that non-processed fruit and vegetables generally do not carry a date marking; some countries are shifting to 'best before' dates on dairy products; while the use of 'best before' date where not required by law varies across products and markets. It was also highlighted that removing date marking does not necessarily reduce food waste, as a balance must be sought between consumer information and traceability requirements.

Discussion:

- **Matvett** explained that efforts to reduce plastic packaging could sometimes shorten the shelf-life of produce. Research from Norway shows that both correct packaging and temperature are crucial and can double the shelf-life of vegetables. The priority should be on finding the optimal packaging rather than removing it. **WRAP** replied that their research on this topic showed that packaging did not extend shelf-life for the 5 products tested (apples, bananas, broccoli, cucumbers, potatoes). **WRAP** called on retailers to sell 24 product items loose, as impacts modelling shows a significant reduction in waste for those products.
- **BEUC** pointed out that retailers should also follow storage recommendations to avoid damaging fruits and vegetables before they reach the consumer. **BEUC** highlighted that it is not uncommon for consumers to purchase produce that look perfectly fine in the supermarket but become spoiled just a few days after purchase, regardless of how they are stored at home. **WRAP** encouraged all members to share any study results and insights they may have on how date marking and date labelling can impact consumer food waste through the Hub or the Platform's Teams group.

- **Denmark** inquired whether WRAP's study also considered how packaging removal for fruits and vegetables would affect food waste generation across the supply chain, up to households. **WRAP** explained that the study focused on households, as this was identified as the area with the highest impact on food waste generation. WRAP recommended that further research on the impacts of packaging removal for fresh produce on retail and other sectors should be carried out, especially in the UK where the norm is to sell most fresh produce packaged.

4. Wrap up and conclusions

Based on input gathered from members during the meeting, the WRAP co-chair announced a list of topics that can be explored for the next meeting of the sub-group:

1. Improving understanding and use of date marking to support behavioural change:

- Additional on-pack information to support consumer behaviour change around date marking
- Risk perception and influence on behaviour
- Cost of food and impact on food waste

2. Date marking practices:

- Date marking removal for fruits and vegetables
- Choice of date marking application for businesses
- Setting shelf-life
- QR codes

One of the possible outputs of the sub-group could be **a living repository of useful resources** (studies, initiative examples, policies etc.) on date marking and food waste prevention where members could post links to their relevant work. This could sit on the Teams space of the sub-group and the Commission could create a first draft based on initiatives submitted by members through the surveys and the Hub.

Denmark asked about the way in which the sub-group would be involved in work on revision of the Regulation on Food Information for Consumers. The Commission explained that preparation of the legislative proposal was now in the final stages before adoption and that the Platform was consulted throughout the process, including through a dedicated consultation on the consumer research study which took place on 30 November 2021. An update on this work will be on the agenda for the Platform plenary meeting on 20 October 2022.

In closing the meeting, the co-chairs thanked all members for a fruitful exchange and announced that the second meeting of the sub-group would take place in autumn.