Background

Food is a significant waste in the average household garbage bin. Audits undertaken by Sustainability Victoria show that food is about 40% of what is thrown out by households.

In order to better understand what people’s knowledge, perceptions, attitudes and behaviour about food waste are, and why so much food is wasted, Sustainability Victoria carried out a survey, in 2010, of just over 1200 Victorian households.

The survey was conducted online and was completed by Victorian residents aged 18 and over who were mainly or equally responsible for buying and managing food in their households.

In addition to the online survey, a second qualitative survey was carried out using four focus groups, each with eight people.

The results represent the most comprehensive and up-to-date analysis of community knowledge, attitudes and behaviour conducted about food and food waste in Victoria.

Food is wasted when we:

- don’t finish our meals
- leave food too long in the fridge
- cook too much
- buy more than needed
- store food incorrectly
- throw away leftovers.

The people who waste the most food are:

- those aged between 18 and 24
- households with incomes of more than $130,000 a year
- households with incomes of $65,000-$80,000
- families with children.

People waste food because they buy and cook too much, don’t finish their meals, and don’t store food correctly.
The research findings will be used to inform further work in the area of organics waste avoidance.

Survey participants were asked to estimate the cost of food their household throws away each week. Fresh food tops the list both by amount – on average nearly three litres a week – and value, on average $9.20 a week or nearly $500 a year.

**Average weekly household food waste in Victoria ($)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Cost</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fresh food</td>
<td>$9.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leftovers</td>
<td>$7.20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Packaged/Long life</td>
<td>$6.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frozen food</td>
<td>$5.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home delivered/take away</td>
<td>$4.50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drinks</td>
<td>$5.60</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

When we asked people why they wasted food, they gave a number of reasons. The most common responses were:
- household members didn’t always finish their meals
- food was left in the fridge or freezer for too long
- too much food was cooked in the first place
- food went off before the ‘use by’ or ‘best before’ date
- food was bought on sale and then didn’t last long
- family members changed their plans.

Some of the most common responses within each category are listed in the table below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behaviour</th>
<th>% of respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Buying</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I think I need more than I actually do</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’m tempted by special offers</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Cooking</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I prefer to serve too much rather than not enough</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I find it hard to estimate how much to cook per person</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Storing</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’m unsure about the best way to store different types of food</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I don’t have appropriate storage containers</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Who wastes the most food?**

Everyone wastes food on occasion but the surveys show the top four groups are:
- young consumers aged between 18 and 24 (14.2 litres p.w.)
- those in higher income households earning $130,000 and over (12.8 litres)
- those in moderate income households earning $65,000-$80,000 (11 litres)
- families with children (9.8 litres).

**Levels of concern**

Overall, people had a low awareness of the issue of food waste. Before they estimated their household waste, only 9% of those surveyed thought they were throwing away more uneaten food than they should.

When they became aware of the scale of the issue, most people appeared to be keen to learn how to avoid food waste but reluctant to go out of their way to do this because it meant some change in behaviour.

People were less concerned about wasting food than they were about other forms of waste (in particular, interest paid on credit cards and wasted electricity).

People also thought that although they were wasting food, by far the largest amount of household waste was packaging.

**People are prepared to take steps to reduce food waste**

Respondents were asked which actions they would be prepared or willing to take to reduce food waste in their households.

They said that to some degree they were prepared to:
- buy only what they need
- cook only what they need
- change the way they store food
- write a shopping list based on a planned menu.

**Actions that respondents are willing to take**

- **Buying only the food that is needed**
- **Changing the way food is stored**
- **Cooking the right amount of food**
- **Writing a shopping list based on a menu plan**