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Anti Food Waste Movement Gets Government Support

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Report Highlights:

In March 2012, Ilse Aigner, Minister for Food, Agriculture, and Consumer Protection (BMELV), announced a nation-wide initiative to combat food waste in Germany. In the midst of a growing social movement, catalyzed by a popular documentary, Minister Aigner is building a growing and relatively uncontroversial effort that crosses party lines. The BMELV's "Too Good for the Bin" (Zu gut für die Tonne) campaign seeks to inform Germans about how much food they throw away, why they throw it away, and steps anyone can take to reduce waste. Food waste in Germany is estimated at more than 80 kg (176 lbs) per year per person.

Food waste throughout the supply chain is not a phenomenon unique to Germany. According to a UN study, North American and European consumers waste an estimated amount of 95-115 kg (210-253 lbs) of food per capita a year whereas those in sub-Saharan Africa and southeast Asia waste just 6-11 kg (13.2 – 24.2 lbs) per capita per year ^[i].

In 2010, the BMELV began to raise awareness about food waste with the phrase, “Better Appreciation of the Value of Food!” It is a common German view that food prices are too low, which leads people to waste food. The BMELV sought to instill more appreciation for food through its campaign showing that food is valuable. It was the main topic of Minister Aigner’s speech at the Opening Speech of International Green Week in Berlin in January 2011. ^[iii] However, the campaign has generally failed to catch on.

In September 2011, an independent film by Valentin Thurn, “[Taste the Waste](#),” debuted in Germany and shocked audiences about the level of food waste in developed economies. The film made an impassioned call for a change. The images of the film were so powerful and the statistics so shocking that it inspired many Germans to protest current food handling practices. In response, the “food sharing” movement in Germany was born. Those in this movement seek to collect food that has already been disposed of by supermarkets or share food with one another, refusing to buy food because so much is being wasted, often before the “Use By” date has expired. The “food sharing” movement has grown significantly, gaining more than 8,000 members on its website in the first seven weeks alone. The goal of the website, which includes a phone App, is to connect people who have a surplus of food with people who are searching for food. Therefore, food that would have otherwise been thrown away is being given to others. ^[iv]



The success of the film may have inspired BMELV to change its approach. As this movement gained momentum within Germany, the BMELV stepped forward to formally address the problem of food waste within the country’s borders. In a rollout conference on March 2012, Minister Aigner championed the name “Too Good for the Bin” for the campaign to lessen food waste in Germany. Part of the campaign included a 2012 study by the University of Stuttgart on the “Determination of discarded food and proposals for a minimization of food wastage in Germany” which has concrete data for how

much food Germans in particular waste. This study has become the reference point used by the BMELV campaign. According to this study, the total amount of food wasted per year in Germany is 11 million tons and 60% of that food waste comes from private households.^[v] Each German is estimated to waste more than 80 kg of food per year.

The “Too Good for the Bin” campaign mainly targets private households, emphasizing that 65% of this food waste could be avoided. The campaign includes a website, phone App, leaflets at supermarkets, and exhibitions, all in the hopes of informing and changing the mentality of a throw-away culture. The campaign seeks to inform German households of better planning while grocery shopping, better storage of food, making the most of leftovers, and trusting instinct rather than “Best Before” dates on packages.^[vi] The ultimate goal is to reduce Germany’s waste by 50% by 2020.^[vii]



The “Too Good for the Bin” initiative is part of a joint effort that the BMELV is establishing amongst the industry, trade, agriculture, restaurant, and household players in remedying food waste. In her speech in March 2012, Minister Aigner stated that she recognized that it is “both a producer and consumer problem,” to be dealt with using a broad supply chain alliance.^[viii] For example, last year, the BMELV paired with the Federal Association of the German Retail Grocery Trade to start a nationwide initiative to raise awareness on the difference between “Best Before” dates and “Use By” dates.^[ix]

Recognizing that the problem cannot just be dealt with at the national level, the BMELV is working with a German firm, Projektträger Jülich, on a competition among regions within Germany against food waste. The competition between cities and municipalities seeks to identify the region with the best and most innovative practices against food waste.^[x]

Also, the BMELV is to some extent trying to tie the anti-food waste movement to the 'buy local' movement. BMELV is trying to make it easier for consumers to know which food items are produced locally while shopping. Companies currently have wide latitude on origin claims. BMELV has started the “Window of the Region” labels that are standardized for all products to clearly state from which region the ingredients originate and where the product has been processed in an effort to cut down on waste in transport. The first products with the regional labels went on sale in various test markets in January 2013.^[xi]

The Ministry has also been calling for an improved database of production quantities and tracking systems for more accurate data on waste. This will not only provide data on food waste in agriculture and primary production, but also optimize process and operations for the future, thus making it an overall profitable undertaking.

BMELV has also gone past mere awareness and hopes to establish more concrete regulations. Within the Bundestag, the German government body comparable to the U.S. House of Representatives, the Minister has been pushing for a broad alliance among parties who could provide not only support in raising awareness, but also possibly lead to regulation laws. In addition, the Ministry is supporting the EU Commission and EU Parliament as they work on EU-wide regulations on food waste. For example, in August 2012, the EU began the FUSIONS campaign (Food Use for Social Innovation by Optimizing waste prevention Strategies) that intends to develop a Common Food Waste Policy for the EU27 and reduce food waste by half by 2020.^[xii]

Raising awareness on food waste is also being addressed at the UN level with similar goals to the “Too Good for the Bin” campaign in Germany. Established in 2011, the SAVE Food initiative set forth by the UN Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO) was designed to help cut down on food losses and waste worldwide. This initiative was started after a study showed that a third of the food produced worldwide for human consumption is thrown away or lost. A main goal of this initiative was to “improve infrastructure from food production to consumption”^[xiii]. At the Rio+20 Summit in June 2012, Heads of State and Government further expanded this initiative with a 10-Year Framework of Programs for Sustainable Consumption and Production, one of the most vital elements of the framework being the food sector. Spawning from this in January 2013 was the FAO campaign “Think, Eat, Save” that targets food wasted by consumers, retailers, and the hospitality industry.^[xiv] A main goal of the “Think, Eat, Save” campaign is to “accelerate action and provide a global vision and information-sharing portal for the many and diverse initiatives currently underway around the world.”^[xv] While the BMELV is not an official partner of the “Think, East, Save” campaign, several German companies including Deutsche Bahn and Düsseldorf Messe are major sponsors.

Beginning as a grassroots social movement within Germany, efforts to combat food waste have grown steadily. The issue is being taken seriously by the Federal government, which joined an ambitious goal of cutting EU waste by half by 2020. It is expected that Germany will continue to show leadership on the issue, both within Europe and on a global stage.

[i] <http://www.bmelv.de/SharedDocs/Pressemitteilungen/EN/2012/66-AI-LMStudie.html>

[ii] Ibid.

[iii] <http://www.bmelv.de/SharedDocs/Reden/EN/2011/01-20-AI-Opening-IGW.html#doc1743226bodyText2>

[iv] <http://news.yahoo.com/german-bin-divers-connected-wage-war-food-waste-140644910.html>

[v] <http://www.bmelv.de/SharedDocs/Standardartikel/EN/Food/TooGoodForTheBin.html>

- [vi] <https://www.zugutfuerdietonne.de/>
- [vii] http://www.ecopol-project.eu/en/media_material/news/?a=viewItem&itemid=274
- [viii] <http://www.bmelv.de/SharedDocs/Standardartikel/EN/Food/TooGoodForTheBin.html>
- [ix] <http://www.bmelv.de/SharedDocs/Pressemitteilungen/EN/2012/66-AI-LMStudie.html>
- [x] http://www.ecopol-project.eu/en/media_material/news/?a=viewItem&itemid=274
- [xi] <http://www.bmelv.de/SharedDocs/Standardartikel/EN/Food/Labelling-Regional-Products.html>
- [xii] http://cordis.europa.eu/search/index.cfm?fuseaction=proj.document&PJ_LANG=EN&PJ_RCN=13017284&pid=238&q=066797B6D3F374AB2E1221B33F072842&type=adv
- [xiii] <http://www.fao.org/save-food/en/>
- [xiv] <http://www.un.org/en/zerohunger/pdfs/ThinkEatSave.pdf>
- [xv] <http://www.un.org/en/zerohunger/pdfs/ThinkEatSave.pdf>