

Get serious about food wastage – the Pact is the perfect forum

by Mark Mitchell, chairman of the Australian Food Cold Chain Council (AFCCC)

The recent launch of the Australian Food Pact by the Australian Government will go down as one of the most significant steps yet taken to attack the country's serious food waste problem.

The Pact is basically a commitment by organisations involved in the food business, to forget about competition for a while, and collaborate in a number of solutions that will make the food system more sustainable and resilient.

Boiling it all down, it is simply about spreading good practice across Australia. If everyone followed good practice, we wouldn't have such a large food waste problem in the first place. But it is the scale of bad practice that should make everyone in the food business sit up and take notice – every year, 7.6 million tonnes of food, enough to fill the Melbourne Cricket Ground to the brim almost nine times, never make it to a table. The cost of this is \$36.6 billion every year.

If that's not bad enough, the impact of this food wastage on the environment is huge, amounting to 17.5 million tonnes of CO₂ every year.

The AFCCC's role in the fight against food wastage may be small, but for the Australian food cold chain, it is significant. The extent of bad practice in the handling and transport of our cold food contributes substantially to the figures mentioned above.

The AFCCC is working on programs that will introduce uniform standards in cold chain systems. The Food Pact is doing the same thing on a much larger scale.

The Pact has a target of signing up 50 signatories to help deliver the country's food target of halving food waste by 2030. It is symptomatic of our food chain that only eight companies have signed up so far. Certainly, they are the big guys, like the two major food retail chains, and that is encouraging. Many companies spend lots of advertising dollars skiting about their environmental credentials, but if you dig deep enough, you find that many of their claims are lip service.

So having companies sign up to the Pact in a very visible and transparent way, is the best plan yet to have them commit to a range of solutions and help them identify food waste hotspots and root causes.

It is the food industry's inbred reluctance to collaborate that is stifling so many worthwhile initiatives. The AFCCC saw this at first hand with its release of the first of a series of cold food codes dealing with thermometers and their role in cold chain compliance. A world standard training program that we released to support the code has not exactly been mobbed.

All of us in the cold chain collectively have to lift our game, we need to sign up every cold chain practitioner from every loading dock, every transport and every cold room in the country to higher levels of training.

I would appeal to food industry companies at all levels of the chain, including the cold chain, to seriously consider signing up to the Australian Food Pact, to show that we understand the seriousness of the problem, and that we are prepared to do something about it.

How can we lose?

By being involved, you will have access to the best brains in the land to help you move to a more financially and environmentally sustainable business model, allowing you to provide products more efficiently. If that's not enough, the average return on investment ratio for food waste prevention initiatives is seven to one – for every dollar invested you get seven dollars back. In the hospitality and food service sector, the return is expected to be as high as ten to one.

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