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# Feeding others with food we waste

By Herb Johnson

America is trying to be more socially and environmentally conscious. As a society, we have implemented recycling programs, set standards for green construction practices, and we consciously conserve energy and water. However, a major area of waste still remains in our country: food. Continually, Americans throw away perfectly good food — fruits, vegetables, meat, dairy, even pastas, grains and nonperishables. Our half-eaten dinners and fruitcakes sent from Grandma are filling our landfills.

According to a 2004 study from the University of Arizona Tucson, American households waste 14 percent of their food purchases on average. This is in addition to about 27 million tons of edible food (worth \$30 billion) thrown away yearly by America's convenience stores, restaurants and supermarkets, according to the University of Arizona. Estimates range anywhere from one quarter to one half of all food in America goes to waste each year.

Not only does throwing away food cost money — both for consumers and the government to dispose of — it takes up space in landfills, and produces methane gas as it rots. Methane is a greenhouse gas that the U.S. Environmental Protection

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Agency claims is 20 times more effective at trapping heat in the atmosphere than carbon dioxide over a 100-year period. The EPA also notes that landfills account for 34 percent of U.S. methane emissions — the largest human-related source of methane in the United States.

Simultaneously, millions of people across our country are struggling to make ends meet, especially as gas prices skyrocket and the economy continues to slump. America's Second Harvest noted that in 2006, 35.5 million Americans lived in "food insecure" households, 22.8 million adults and 12.6 million children — that's 10.9 percent of American households.

To give some perspective, the U.S. Department of Agriculture estimates that if America wastes 96 billion pounds of food per year (which many consider a conservative estimate), recovering just 5 percent could give 4 million people a full

day's worth of food.

Fortunately, there are organizations that have recognized this gap and are taking action to provide a solution. America's Second Harvest in Chicago, the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services Food Recovery Program, and the San Diego Rescue Mission through its Partners for Hunger Relief Program are actively redistributing millions of pounds of food annually. The San Diego Rescue Mission, like many of these organizations, collects food from grocery stores, caterers, restaurants, fast-food franchises, schools, universities, hospitals and event venues.

Certified food handlers pick up and transport the food in refrigerated trucks to a refrigerated warehouse. Staff members then redistribute this food, which would otherwise be thrown away, to dozens of social service agencies that feed thousands of hungry people each year.

While no individual or organization is going to solve world hunger, everyone can do their part. Businesses can donate services and excess food from the company cafeteria, or offer a corporate sponsorship. Individuals can volunteer with their local food recovery program or organize a food drive. Or, next time Grandma sends a fruitcake, instead of tossing it, donate it to a local food recovery center. It could be the icing on the cake for someone less fortunate.