

Rethinking Food Waste: Addressing Systemic Governance Barriers to Reform

Challenging Structural Inequities and Informing Policy to Reduce Food Waste Across the Supply Chain

Australia discards 7.6 million tonnes of food annually, waste valued at \$36 billion, despite widespread concern about its economic, environmental, and social impacts.

Efforts to reduce this waste have been undermined by deep systemic barriers in the way food waste is governed. For instance, supermarkets generate an estimated \$1.2 billion in profit from food waste, complicating the case for reforms such as changes to date labelling.

Research by Professor Carol Richards and Associate Professor Bree Hurst, from QUT's Centre for Agriculture and the Bioeconomy, reveals how entrenched practices within food retail and policy structures hinder meaningful waste reduction. Their work exposes a "legitimacy gap" in supermarket sustainability narratives; while promoting corporate responsibility, retailers

continue to enforce cosmetic standards that result in large volumes of edible food being rejected. The team's research moves beyond consumer blame, interrogating the governance structures, policy inertia, and competing industry interests that enable waste to persist. It highlights the need for coordinated, system-wide reforms—focusing on upstream interventions rather than end-of-chain fixes.

This work is shaping global and national debates. It has been cited in UK Parliament Research Briefings (2024), by the New Zealand Office of the Prime Minister's Chief Science Advisor, and by The Australia Institute in its 2023 report in the Analysis & Policy Observatory. The research has also gained international recognition from CGIAR, reinforcing its relevance to global food security, sustainability, and social justice.



Impact highlights

- Exposed systemic governance barriers to food waste reduction, shifting focus from consumers to structural reform.
- Influenced food waste policy discussions in Australia, New Zealand, and the UK, including citation in UK Parliament Research Briefings (2024).
- Recognised by Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR) as contributing to international goals in food security and sustainable resource management.



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