

Ag secretary on quest to cut food waste

By Karen Matthews, AP

Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack announced a goal this week to cut the amount of food that Americans waste by 50 percent by 2030.

“The United States enjoys the most productive and abundant food supply on Earth, so too much of this food goes to waste,” Vilsack said in New York City, where he was joined by food-industry representatives and officials from the Environmental Protection Agency.

Vilsack likened the effort to reduce food waste to the anti-littering campaigns of the 1960s and '70s that shamed Americans for tossing trash out car windows. “This is the logical extension,” he said. “This is the next litter campaign.”

The U.S. Department of Agriculture estimates that Americans waste 133 billion pounds of food every year, or 31 percent of their overall food supply.

Vilsack said other nations waste similar amounts and the U.S. must lead a global effort to use food more efficiently. “This is an opportunity for us to make a statement and provide leadership,” he said.

EPA officials said the massive waste is a problem not just because the food could feed the hungry but also because it ends up in landfills and affects the environment.

“Twenty-one percent of all the waste in landfills is food,” EPA Deputy Administrator Stan Meiburg said. “Once it’s there, it produces methane, which is a greenhouse gas.”

Leslie Sarasin, president and CEO of the Food Marketing Institute, a food retailers' trade association, said the industry supports cutting food waste because it operates on a "razor-thin" margin of 1 or 2 percent.

"Reducing food waste at all levels in the food chain – farm, factory, store and home – is certainly one of those issues with economic and emotional appeal," she said.

The officials spoke at a facility in Long Island City, Queens, operated by the nonprofit City Harvest, which started in 1982 as an effort to salvage excess food from restaurants. City Harvest now takes donations from businesses and farmers and delivers it to 500 food banks and soup kitchens.

Vilsack toured the warehouse packed with donated produce like carrots that were too big to sell and called it "truly inspiring."

He said the campaign to cut food waste includes educating consumers about how long to keep food before it must be thrown out.

He said he recently used the USDA's new mobile FoodKeeper app to determine whether chicken salad in his refrigerator was still good.

It was, and he ate it.