



Statewide Engagement Strategies for Food Waste Prevention

Understanding Food Date Labels and Reducing Edible Food Waste in Washington State

By

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For the

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DEPARTMENT OF
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State of Washington

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Executive Summary

Confusion about food date labeling creates uncertainty in how food is used, donated, and discarded. Misinterpreting quality-related labels as safety deadlines often leads to edible food being thrown away instead of used, shared, or donated.

At the request of the Washington State Department of Ecology's Center for Sustainable Food Management (Food Center), the Evans School Consulting Lab team conducted the *Statewide Engagement Strategies for Food Waste Prevention* study to identify practical outreach, food safety, and messaging strategies that can strengthen participation in Food Waste Prevention Week and Food Safety Month. The project focuses on schools, food service businesses, and nonprofit organizations, where daily food decisions occur and where clear messaging can have direct impact. Because of this potential, the Food Center has prioritized expanding participation in Food Waste Prevention Week among these groups.

This study used a mixed-methods approach that includes a literature review, a statewide partner survey, and interviews, which revealed several key themes. Literature findings show consumers frequently confuse quality-related and safety-related date labels due to inconsistent terminology and strong associations between printed dates and perceived food-safety risk. Effective communication must therefore be clear, credible, and actionable, and is most successful when delivered through trusted everyday food environments. These insights shape how institutional partners can support statewide food-waste-prevention efforts.

Survey and interview results add further nuance. While partners commonly provide general food-waste education, specific training on date labels is limited. Decision-makers rely on multiple factors beyond printed dates, including formal safety guidance, storage conditions, packaging integrity, internal policies, and liability concerns. Needs also differ by sector:

- **Schools** emphasized ready-to-use materials and signage that integrate easily into existing routines.
- **Food service businesses** emphasized practical staff training, customer-facing materials, and clear donation guidance.

Across all partner types, adaptable ready-to-use materials emerged as the most widely requested support. The study also identified regional disparities, particularly lower awareness and participation in eastern Washington, underscoring the need for localized outreach through trusted networks.

Based on these insights, the report recommends four strategies:

1. Providing tailored outreach and ready-to-use materials to reduce participation barriers;
2. Improving clarity and consistency in statewide date-label messaging;
3. Strengthening coordination across Food Waste Prevention Week partners to enhance message credibility and reach; and
4. Targeted support for schools in eastern Washington to address geographic disparities in awareness and engagement.

If implemented, these strategies are expected to improve partner understanding, increase participation in outreach initiatives, and reduce edible food waste across Washington. The report concludes with an evaluation plan to track progress and guide future refinement.

Chapter 1: Introduction

This project examines how clear and consistent outreach about food date labels can strengthen participation in Food Waste Prevention Week and Food Safety Month. Confusion over terms like “Best By,” “Use By,” and “Sell By” remains one of the most common reasons edible food is thrown away unnecessarily (Szenderák et al., 2025). These labels influence daily decisions in schools, food service businesses, and households about whether food is safe to serve, use, or donate. Because these decisions occur across thousands of settings statewide, improving date-label understanding represents a key opportunity to reduce edible food waste in Washington.

Reducing edible food waste supports the Washington Department of Ecology’s mission to protect and enhance environmental and community health. When less edible food is discarded, methane emissions decline, waste-handling costs decrease, and more food becomes available to Washington residents. These outcomes advance the state’s climate goals, particularly methane-reduction targets for organic materials, and align with the Use Food Well Washington Plan’s broader vision for an equitable, resilient food system.

To explore this challenge, Ecology’s Center for Sustainable Food Management (Food Center) partnered with the University of Washington Evans School Consulting Team. The project examined how partners interpret date labels, what barriers they encounter in food handling, and what types of messages and tools would best support their participation in statewide food-waste-prevention efforts.

Background

Washington’s authorizing laws guide this work. Under the [Food Waste Reduction Act \(RCW 70A.205.715\)](#) and the [Use Food Well Washington Plan](#), the Food Center leads statewide efforts to cut edible food waste. The state’s approach centers on three strategies:

- **Prevention:** reducing food waste at the source
- **Rescue:** redirecting surplus edible food to people
- **Recovery:** turning inedible food into compost, animal feed, or energy

Washington aims to cut total and edible food waste by 50% by 2030. The state currently disposes of about 1.2 million tons of food each year, including roughly 390,000 tons of edible food (Ecology, 2022). Because decomposing food generates methane, these efforts also support state climate requirements related to organics management.

Organics Management Laws passed in 2022, 2024, and 2025 reinforce this direction by requiring greater organics separation and collection:

- **RCW 70A.205.545** phases in business organics collection from 2024–2026
- **RCW 70A.205.540** requires local governments to phase in year-round curbside organics collection by 2030

These laws aim to divert 75% of organic material from landfills and recover 20% of edible food for consumption by 2025. This work also supports the Healthy Environment for All (HEAL) Act by ensuring overburdened communities benefit from improvements in the food system. Strengthening date-label clarity, communication tools, and donation pathways helps schools, restaurants, and community groups reduce waste and support community health.

This project highlights restaurants and schools, specifically, as key partners because their scale and influence make them essential partners in reducing edible food waste and strengthening community food systems. These settings:

- Handle large volumes of food each day
- Make frequent decisions informed by date labels
- Communicate regularly with students, families, and customers
- Waste significant amounts of food. Some school food categories are discarded at rates ranging from 12% to over 70% (Elnakib et al., 2021)
- Contribute to avoidable food losses in restaurants, where 4–10% of food is wasted before reaching customers and roughly 21% of served food goes uneaten (Sakaguchi et al., 2018)

Food Waste Prevention Week and Food Safety Month

Washington promotes food waste awareness each year through Food Waste Prevention Week, which now takes place during Food Safety Month in September. The shift from April to September aligns the campaign with a period when many schools, colleges, and food service operations return to full activity, creating stronger opportunities for consistent safety and waste-prevention messaging.

In 2025, 21 counties and 110 partner organizations participated, rescuing more than 30,000 pounds of food (Ecology, 2025). As statewide participation grows, especially in rural and eastern regions, partners have emphasized the need for clearer messaging, practical tools, and stronger regional coordination. By connecting legislation, outreach efforts, and equity goals, Washington continues to strengthen its prevention, rescue, and recovery systems and move toward its 2030 food waste reduction targets.

Research Questions

This study is guided by one central question and four secondary questions that help identify communication gaps and determine which strategies can most effectively improve statewide engagement.

Primary Research Question

- Which communication strategies about food date labels can effectively engage partners, and help them engage their communities, during Food Waste Prevention Week and Food Safety Month?

Secondary Research Questions

- Which audiences have the greatest potential to reduce edible food waste by improving their understanding of date labels?
- How do schools, food service businesses, and nonprofit partners currently interpret date labels, and how do these interpretations affect decisions to serve, use, or donate food?
- Which types of messages do partners find clear, credible, and actionable, and how does this align with existing research?
- How do factors such as geography, partner type, and organizational setting shape engagement with statewide outreach, including Food Waste Prevention Week?

Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter summarizes research on how people understand food date labels and how these interpretations influence decisions to use, donate, or throw away food. It combines academic studies, national policy reviews, and Washington-specific reports. These insights help explain why food date-label confusion is widespread and why schools and food service businesses are key partners for statewide outreach.

The date labeling problem

Food date labels are the printed dates on packaged foods, using terms such as “sell-by,” “best-by,” “use-by,” and “best before” to communicate manufacturer guidance about product quality or, less commonly, safety. These labels are not federally standardized, except for infant formula, and most indicate peak quality rather than food safety limits, which contributes to consumer confusion and food waste.

According to ReFED’s *Standardized Date Labeling Impact Framework* (2019), date labels significantly influence whether households keep or discard food. Research shows that confusion about what a label means is one of the most common drivers of household food waste.

Studies summarized by Szenderák et al. (2025) show:

- While more than 80% of consumers use date labels, far fewer correctly define key terms.
- Only 44.8% correctly defined “Use By,” even though it is widely interpreted as a strict safety cut-off.
- Many consumers throw out food at or near the date, regardless of condition.

These findings show that misinterpretation is widespread and directly increases edible food waste.

Consumer understanding of food date labels

Consumer understanding of date labels is shaped by four main factors (Szenderák et al., 2025; National Academies, 2020): the label terminology, food safety concerns, household routines and habits, and the setting where food decisions are made.

Label terminology and framing

Even when terminology is standardized, many people still interpret any printed date as a warning. For example, “Best If Used By” is intended as a **quality** guideline while “Use By” is intended for safety (or once-quality declines significantly). Despite this, consumers routinely treat both as safety deadlines (Szenderák et al. 2025). This means that simply defining the labels will not necessarily change behavior.

Food safety concerns

Many consumers believe eating food past the printed date is unsafe. Research summarized by Szenderák et al. (2025) shows:

- 70% of surveyed consumers think discarding food after the date reduces foodborne illness risk.
- 84% discard food at or near the date even when appearance, smell, and storage conditions suggest the food is still good.

These beliefs strongly influence daily food decisions.

Household routines and identities

Household decision-making is influenced by routines and social identity. For example, the “good provider” identity, wanting to offer plentiful choices, can lead to over-purchasing, which then increases food waste (Werkman et al. 2025). This does not mean people misunderstand labels because of identity; instead, date labels are interpreted within broader household behaviors.

Institutional settings

The National Academies (2020) emphasize that food waste behavior is shaped by:

- knowledge and skills,
- risk perception,
- norms and identity,
- the built environment,
- policies and operational constraints.

This applies to institutions as well as households. In food service environments, risk concerns and internal operating procedures often influence how staff interpret date labels (Khan et al. 2025).

Variation across audience and institutional settings

Statewide research from Washington's *Use Food Well* campaign (Ecology 2024) shows that food-waste awareness and messaging preferences vary across age groups, languages, household types, and racial and ethnic identities.

Only 11% of respondents knew about Food Waste Prevention Week, but people who had recently seen food-waste messaging were more likely to express concern about food waste, change their behavior, and want more information. This suggests that early touchpoints, grocery stores, schools, social media, and community organizations, play a key role in shaping behavior.

Communication channel preferences

More than half of respondents preferred to receive food waste messages at grocery stores, with strong interest in:

- email or websites,
- school or district communications,
- community spaces,
- social media,
- messaging apps.

Interest in giveaways, apps, and interactive tools was higher among younger respondents, families with children, Spanish-speaking households, and larger households.

Institutional setting examples

Research highlights that outreach works best when it fits into each setting's daily routines:

- **Schools** benefit from hands-on learning, food waste audits, and simple signage (WWF's *Food Waste Warriors*, 2019).
- **Businesses** prefer outreach emphasizing operational efficiency, cost savings, and simple compliance steps (Ecology's *Business Organics Management Research Report*, 2025).

This makes schools and food service settings strong partners for Food Waste Prevention Week.

Date label education: A key priority for food rescue

Research shows that date-label confusion affects not only food waste, but also food donation.

Washington's *Food Donation Workgroup Legislative Report* (Ecology 2025) recommends:

- statewide education campaigns including safe handling and donation messages;

- technical assistance and best practices for donors; and
- consistent guidance on labeling, temperature control, and liability protections.

A national policy review by Khan et al. (2025) found that current date-labeling practices create confusion for consumers, businesses, food banks, food recovery organizations, and other supply-chain actors. The report notes that federal law requires date labels only for infant formula and does not otherwise standardize date label phrases, leaving manufacturers and states to use varied terms and rules (Khan et al., 2025). As a result, organizations often have to interpret date labels independently, leading to premature disposal, uncertainty about donation eligibility, and inconsistent guidance across recovery networks.

These findings reinforce Washington’s proposed direction: date-label education is not solely a consumer issue but also a coordination and operations issue for schools, businesses, donors, and hunger-relief partners.

Policy gaps in Washington

The literature highlights a clear policy gap: General date-label education is not enough.

Schools, businesses, and food donation partners need setting-specific guidance that:

- distinguishes quality and safety,
- explains how to make decisions when food is near or past its date,
- fits into cafeteria and kitchen operations,
- clarifies donation eligibility and Good Samaritan protections.

Washington’s Use Food Well findings also show variation in awareness, exposure, preferred communication channels, and interest in future strategies across audience groups (Washington State Department of Ecology, 2024).

The literature suggests consistent messaging within campaigns are needed and requires a core message delivered through adaptable tools.

Principles for effective date-label outreach

The literature suggests that improving date label education requires more than defining terms. Consumers also need help understanding what actions to take when food is near or past a printed date. As a result, three principles emerge as critical for date label education messaging and outreach: clarity, credibility, and actionability.

Table 1. Essential principles for effective date label education

Principle	Definition
Clarity	Date label education should clearly distinguish quality-related guidance from safety-related or discarding guidance. This includes explaining how terms such as “Best If Used By” and “Use By” are intended to function and why consumers may confuse quality indicators with food safety indicators (ReFED, 2019; Szenderák et al., 2025).
Credibility	Credible messaging should be delivered through coordinated partners and familiar food-related settings. Existing implementation evidence points to the value of shared campaign materials, grocery stores as preferred communication channels, and practical business-facing outreach tied to operational needs (Gosliner et al., 2020; Washington State Department of Ecology, 2024; Washington State Department of Ecology, 2025).
Actionability	Actionable guidance should translate date label information into practical decision support. This may include storage guidance, sensory checks, safe handling practices, donation eligibility information, and clear direction on labeling, temperature control, and liability protections (Szenderák et al., 2025; Washington State Department of Ecology, 2025).

Clarity, credibility, and actionability work together in food date label communication, and the literature shows that none of them is enough on its own.

Example modes for outreach

Several existing resources provide helpful models:

- **EPA’s Food: Too Good to Waste Toolkit:** strong behavior-change framework tied to measurable actions.
- **Oregon DEQ’s “Wasted Food Wasted Money” Toolkit:** practical, partner-ready materials for businesses.
- **Seattle Public Utilities’ Food Donation Training:** operational tools for staff, with editable templates.
- **NRDC’s Food Waste in Cities Toolkit:** connects outreach to broader system planning and policy.

These resources show that the strongest outreach combines ready-to-use tools, clear partner roles, simple language, coordination across agencies, and built-in evaluation steps.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This study uses a mixed-methods approach to understand how schools, food service businesses, and community partners interpret date labels and how these interpretations shape food use, donation, and disposal decisions. Together, the literature review, statewide partner survey, and partner interviews provide a fuller picture of current practices, needs, and opportunities to strengthen participation in Food Waste Prevention Week and Food Safety Month.

Overview of the research design

Three methods were used:

- **Literature review:** summarized national research on consumer understanding of date labels, communication strategies, and food waste behavior.
- **Statewide survey:** gathered quantitative and qualitative feedback from partners about date-label understanding, decision-making, and outreach needs.
- **Partner interviews:** provided deeper insight into daily food handling practices, challenges, and preferred support tools.

These methods were designed to answer the study's primary question:

Which food date-label outreach and messaging strategies can most effectively engage key partners during Food Waste Prevention Week and Food Safety Month?

Each method also supports the secondary research questions by identifying how different audiences interpret date labels, which messages resonate most, and how geography or partner type may influence engagement.

This study was reviewed by the University of Washington Human Subjects Division (STUDY00025284) and was determined to involve human subjects research that qualifies for exempt status under Category 2. Prior to participation, all individuals received an explanation of the study's purpose and procedures and provided informed agreement to participate.

Target partner groups

The study focused on partners who interact daily with food, influence food-related decisions, or have participated in Food Waste Prevention Week in the past. Outreach was conducted with:

- K–12 schools
- Colleges and universities

- Restaurants and other food service businesses
- Past Food Waste Prevention Week participants
- Members of the Use Food Well Peer Network

A total of 5,577 people were invited, and 52 partners completed the survey. While response rates were low, respondents provided valuable insight into food waste behavior and date-label education needs within their sectors. Below is a summary of outreach to each partner group.

Food service businesses

Restaurants were contacted through the Washington Food Industry Association (WFIA), with additional outreach in Central and Eastern Washington where Food Waste Prevention Week participation has historically been lower.

- Invitations sent: 747
- Responses: 7 (13% of total responses)

K-12 schools

Food Service Directors were contacted through the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI).

- Invitations sent: 300
- Responses: 30 (58% of total responses)

Colleges and universities

Invitations were included in the Washington Hospitality Association's bi-monthly newsletter.

- Outreach audience: 3,000+
- Responses: 8

Food Waste Prevention Week participants

Thirty previous participants were contacted directly and contributed both survey responses and interview interest.

Use Food Well Peer Network

More than 1,500 members received the survey invitation through the Food Center's Use Food Well GovDelivery.

Survey overview

The survey gathered both quantitative and open-ended responses from a wide range of partners. The goal was to understand:

- how partners currently interpret date labels;
- how date labels influence decisions about using, serving, or donating food;
- which outreach materials partners find most helpful; and
- what prevents or encourages participation in Food Waste Prevention Week.

The survey was developed with input from the Food Center to ensure relevance to school and business settings. Because each partner group received only one outreach attempt, response rates were limited. Research from AAPOR (2022) suggests multiple reminders, incentives, or varied contact times would likely increase participation in future studies.

Survey focus areas

The survey explored four central topics:

- Opportunities to reduce edible food waste by improving understanding of date labels;
- How date label interpretations influence self-reported consumption, waste, and donation decisions;
- Which types of date label messaging partners find clear and credible; and
- How demographics and geography may shape engagement with date label messaging and food waste prevention efforts.

Table B2 in Appendix B lists all survey questions, including general questions (GQ) asked of all respondents and those specific to school (SQ) and business (BQ) partners. The table also outlines the purpose of each question and its connection to the study's primary and secondary research questions.

Survey design

A branching survey design ensured respondents only received questions relevant to their sector. All participants began with a core set of general questions, after which the survey routed them to school-specific or business-specific items based on their self-identified role. All respondents were also asked about their awareness of Food Waste Prevention Week and Food Safety Month to help connect their feedback with current or potential engagement in these initiatives. The full list of survey questions appears in Appendix B, Table B2.

Schools

Questions for K–12 school and university staff focused on messaging, educational context, internal practices, and overall food waste awareness. Key items included:

- Ratings of their school’s current food waste awareness and prevention efforts.
- Needs or resources that would most improve food waste reduction.
- Internal policies that influence how food is used or discarded based on date labels.

Food service businesses

Questions for restaurant staff emphasized date label usage and practices, given the operational nature of these environments. Key items included:

- Whether businesses apply date labels and which terms are used.
- How food date labels affect food donation practices.
- Training received on food safety and date labeling.

Partner interviews

To supplement the survey findings, the study conducted qualitative interviews with school and restaurant staff across Washington. All survey respondents who expressed interest in an interview were contacted by the Consulting Team, and eight participants completed interviews. The interview protocol was designed to expand on survey insights by exploring how improved understanding of food date labels could support edible food waste reduction.

Interview design

Interviews followed a semi-structured guide tailored to each sector. Discussions revealed patterns in survey responses and provided practical examples to inform recommendations.

- **School interviews** explored cafeteria routines, communication with students and families, internal policies, and experiences with donation or share-tables.
- **Business interviews** focused on food safety practices, daily decision-making under time pressure, customer-facing considerations, and barriers to donation.

Summary of methodological strengths and limitations

Below are the strengths and weaknesses of the project. Despite the research limitations, the methods provide meaningful insight into real-world needs and opportunities, directly informing the recommendations in Chapter 5.

Strengths

- Mixed methods offered both breadth (survey data) and depth (interviews).

- Targeted outreach centered on sectors with the greatest opportunity to reduce edible food waste.
- Collaboration with the Food Center ensured relevance to statewide program goals.

Limitations

- Survey response rates were low, especially among food service businesses, limiting generalizability.
- Respondents may represent individuals or organizations already more engaged or interested in food waste issues (self-selection bias).

Findings reflect a single moment in time and may shift as statewide policies or resources evolve.

Chapter 4: Findings and Analysis

This chapter summarizes what the study learned from the statewide survey and partner interviews. Together, these findings show how schools, food service businesses, and community organizations interpret date labels; how they decide to use, serve, donate, or discard food; and what supports they need to participate in Food Waste Prevention Week and Food Safety Month.

The results are organized around four themes:

1. Partner awareness of Food Waste Prevention Week and Food Safety Month;
2. Current food waste and food date label education practices;
3. Decision-making about food use, disposal, and donation; and
4. Barriers to participation

Descriptive statistics, cross tabulation, and thematic analysis were used to identify patterns across partner groups and evaluate whether food date label messaging is clear, credible, and actionable. These findings inform the recommendations in Chapter 5.

Survey findings

The survey received 52 responses, most from K–12 schools (71%), resulting in a strong dataset for school settings and more exploratory insights for food service businesses.

Survey responses were geographically uneven. Fewer participants from eastern Washington and the Pacific coast responded, reflecting existing gaps in outreach and awareness. Despite low response rates, the data highlight meaningful differences across sectors and regions.

Awareness and participation in Food Waste Prevention Week

Survey results show that awareness of statewide campaigns is limited and inconsistent.

- Only 46% of respondents were aware of Food Waste Prevention Week.
- 48% were aware of Food Safety Month.
- One-third were unsure whether their own organization had ever participated.

Awareness varied by sector:

- **Schools** were more familiar with statewide food waste education but still had low awareness of the events.
- **Restaurants** had the lowest awareness across all categories.
- **Nonprofits** and community groups had the highest awareness and participation.

Despite this low awareness, respondents across all sectors expressed strong interest in participating, especially if they had access to ready-to-use materials, simple participation guides, posters or signage, and messaging templates. This suggests that lack of participation is not due to unwillingness, but to limited communication, unclear expectations, and uneven access to resources.

Food date label education gaps

While many partners provide general food waste education, far fewer offer specific training on food date labels.

- 56.8% of schools reported teaching or messaging about food waste.
- Only 35.1% provided any education on food date labels.
- More than one-third (37.8%) were unsure whether they had ever been trained on date labels.

These findings mirror national research showing widespread confusion about the meaning of date labels. The survey confirms that this confusion extends into school and food service settings.

Respondents also showed more uncertainty about whether their organization provided date-label education than about general food waste education, reinforcing the need for clearer, more consistent messaging.

Regional patterns

Survey participation was low in eastern Washington and along the western (Pacific) coast (Figure A3), limiting representation from these regions. These geographic gaps reflect limited access to Food Center communications, fewer partner networks in rural areas, and lower awareness of statewide food waste efforts. The variation suggests a need for more localized, region-focused outreach to improve awareness and participation in statewide initiatives.

How organizations make food use decisions

Date labels matter, but they are not the only factors organizations use when deciding whether to keep, serve, or donate food.

Schools

The most influential school decision factors were:

- USDA or state food safety guidance (73.0%)

- Printed date labels (67.6%)
- Storage conditions/time (64.9%)
- Internal SOPs (56.8%)
- Liability concerns (54.1%)
- Packaging integrity (54.1%)

These results show that school decisions are shaped by regulations, safety concerns, and internal procedures, not labels alone.

Food service businesses

Among business respondents (n = 6):

- Food date labels were the dominant factor (83.3%)
- Internal SOPs followed (50.0%)
- Visual checks and customer expectations/brand protection were also influential (33.3%)

Restaurant decision-making is much more risk-averse because of food safety, customer trust, and liability concerns. Businesses often treat date labels as strict safety cut-offs, even when other factors suggest food is still usable.

Barriers and support needs by sector

When asked barriers to participating in food waste prevention, partners across sectors reported varying support needs.

Schools

Respondents emphasized the need for practical, ready-to-use resources that fit directly into existing routines. Key needs included:

- Ready-to-use educational materials and signage (59.5%) for classrooms, cafeterias, and parent communication
- Clear, accessible content that reduces staff preparation time
- Tools that integrate date-label education into existing food waste and food safety initiatives

These preferences indicate that schools require materials that are easy to implement across multiple settings and audiences (Table B10, Appendix B).

Food service businesses

Respondents highlighted a different set of barriers and priorities. Key barriers (Table B11, Appendix B) include:

- Food safety concerns (66.7%)
- Donation logistics or quality standards (50.0%)
- Limited staff time (50.0%)
- Regulatory uncertainty (50.0%)

Business support needs included:

- Integration with Certified Food Protection Manager (CFPM) or food worker training (50.0%)
- Customer-facing signage or templates (33.3%)
- Clear guidance on donation eligibility and liability protections (33.3%)

Motivators for participation

When asked what would motivate participation in Food Waste Prevention Week, partners across sectors consistently chose:

- ready-to-use educational materials,
- simple participation guides,
- pre-made messaging templates,
- posters or signage.

Interest in recognition (certificates) and virtual participation was lower but still notable among nonprofits and community groups. These results indicate that partners want low-burden, high-clarity materials that do not require additional planning or curriculum development.

Interview findings

Eight partner interviews provided deeper insight into daily decision-making and confirmed several themes from the survey.

Date label interpretation

Interviewees interpreted labels in different ways. Many understood “Best By” as a quality marker, while others treated it as a safety cut-off. Restaurant staff described relying on labels more strictly due to customer-facing risks and liability. Across interviews, respondents expressed a desire for clearer, more streamlined guidance that is easy to apply in fast-paced or diverse work environments.

Food safety and donation practices

Partners reported using multiple cues in addition to date labels:

- packaging integrity,
- appearance and smell,
- storage time and conditions, and
- food type (extra caution with meat, seafood, dairy, and prepared foods).

Businesses especially described cautious approaches to donation because of uncertainty about safety rules, donation eligibility, liability protections, and partner capacity.

Practical tools and outreach needs

Respondents across sectors highlighted the need for practical and easy-to-use tools.

- **Schools** expressed interest in large-format posters with simple messaging and materials that could be shared with families through established communication channels.
- **Businesses** placed greater emphasis on employee training, simple standard operating procedures, customer-facing signage, and clear donation guidelines.

Overall, interview findings underscore that effective resources must be tailored to organizational context rather than standardized across sectors.

Summary

Across methods, several consistent themes emerged. These findings directly inform the recommendations in Chapter 5, which focus on tailoring outreach, improving clarity, coordinating messaging, and increasing regional access.

- Confusion about date labels is widespread and directly affects food waste.
- Schools and businesses have distinct needs, requiring different types of outreach.
- Partners want hands-on, easy-to-use tools, not general messaging alone.
- Awareness of Food Waste Prevention Week is uneven across Washington, especially in eastern counties.
- Institutional routines, safety concerns, and operational constraints shape real-world decisions far more than label definitions alone.

Chapter 5: Recommendations

The survey, interviews, and literature review all point to the same conclusion: partners need clearer, more consistent, and easier-to-use tools to feel confident using, serving, and donating food that is still safe. Washington's Food Waste Prevention Week can be a powerful platform for date-label education, but only if outreach materials match the needs of schools, businesses, and community partners.

The recommendations below focus on strengthening statewide engagement, improving date-label clarity, and supporting real-world decision-making in settings where food choices happen every day.

Recommendation 1: Address sector-specific and regional barriers through tailored outreach and partnerships

Findings show that schools, restaurants, and community partners face different constraints and require different types of support. One-size-fits-all materials do not meet these needs. A large majority of partners across sectors selected ready-to-use materials as their top support need. Making participation easy and accessible increases the likelihood that schools and businesses will engage, especially in regions with limited capacity.

Actions

- **Provide downloadable, print-ready materials**, such as posters, donation eligibility checklists, “what to do when food is past the date” signage, freezer reminders, and step-by-step guidance for school-based donation programs for staff.
 - 59.5% of schools, 83.3% of businesses, and 88.9% of nonprofits selected this as their top preference.
- **Add food date label information to in-person and online Certified Food Protection Manager (CFPM) and food worker trainings**. 50% of restaurants requested integration into CFPM or food worker training.
- **Create bilingual and multilingual versions**, especially for family-facing school materials and customer-facing business materials. The literature review highlights that language accessibility improves message uptake and equity.
- **Develop age-specific materials for schools**, such as K–5 posters with visual cues, middle/high school infographics, and parent-facing newsletters or flyers. Interviewees emphasized the importance of materials that connect classroom messaging to family settings.
- **Include donation messaging** within Food Waste Prevention Week materials so that food date label information is tied directly to rescue opportunities.

- **Promote digital toolkits and online recorded webinars for partners in rural areas** who may face logistical barriers to attending in-person events.

Recommendation 2: Strengthen clarity and consistency around food date labels

Date-label confusion is one of the most common and preventable causes of edible food waste. Clear, plain-language messaging can help partners understand what printed dates actually mean, and what actions to take.

Partners frequently mistake quality dates for safety deadlines. Consistent statewide messaging reduces confusion and helps organizations make safer, more confident decisions about food use and donation.

Actions

- **Adopt a statewide message** that clearly explains the difference between quality-based (“Best If Used By”) and safety-based (“Use By”) labels.
- **Pair definitions with simple, actionable examples** (e.g., when to check storage conditions, when sensory cues matter, when NOT to use or donate food).
- **Develop tailored guidance for each sector:**
 - Schools: emphasize hands-on learning and student engagement.
 - Businesses: emphasize donation eligibility, Good Samaritan protections, and cost-saving operational practices.
- **Highlight Washington’s donation liability protections**, especially for businesses that want to donate food past “sell-by” or “use-by” dates.

Recommendation 3: Increase message credibility through coordinated partner communication

Research shows that date-label messaging is more effective when it is shared through trusted, familiar settings, like schools, restaurants, and grocery stores, and when messages are consistent across partners. Partners currently use a patchwork of materials, leading to inconsistent messaging and missed opportunities. Coordination strengthens public trust and reinforces message accuracy.

Actions

- **Integrate date label guidance into all Food Waste Prevention Week outreach.** The data findings suggest awareness of the event is low, so embedding consistent date label messages within all materials increases reach.

- **Deliver coordinated, partner-aligned date label messaging** across schools, businesses, nonprofits, and local agencies.
- **Provide co-brandable templates and consistent statewide date label language that partners can adapt to local needs**, reflecting literature showing that consistency across institutions increases date label message credibility.

Recommendation 4: Targeted outreach to eastern Washington and other under-represented regions

Survey results show lower participation in eastern Washington and coastal areas. Increasing engagement requires closer collaboration with trusted regional networks and local institutions. Geographic gaps in awareness often reflect gaps in access. Strengthening outreach in under-represented regions ensures that statewide efforts reach all communities.

Actions

- **Leverage trusted local networks.** The literature identifies multiple trusted channels, which include local ESDs, public health departments, agricultural extension offices, and community organizations.
- **Tailor localized, ready-to-use materials to the communication channels preferred by rural audiences** as outlined in Use Food Well research (e.g., schools, grocery retail, email, social media).

Expected outcomes

Implementing these strategies will help:

- **Improve partner understanding of date labels.** Clear, consistent messaging helps staff explain food safety and quality to students, families, and customers.
- **Increase engagement in Food Waste Prevention Week.** Removing barriers and providing ready-to-use materials makes it easier for partners to participate and share messages.
- **Reduce edible food waste.** When partners feel confident using, serving, and donating food safely, less food will be thrown away unnecessarily.

Evaluation plan

To track progress, the Food Center can monitor:

Key indicators

- Number and types of organizations participating in Food Waste Prevention Week
- Partner understanding of date labels (via short surveys or follow-ups)

- How often partners use or adapt provided outreach materials
- Regional participation patterns
- Retention of date-label information over time

Data collection methods

- Short partner surveys before and after Food Waste Prevention Week
- Feedback through interviews or virtual debriefs
- Observation of outreach activities
- Geographic participation metrics

These steps will help identify what works well and where additional support is needed.

Study limitations

This study has several limitations. Survey response rates were low, especially among food-service businesses, meaning results should be interpreted as exploratory rather than representative of all Washington partners. The sample may also reflect self-selection bias, as participants with strong interest in food waste may have been more likely to respond. In addition, the findings represent partner experiences at a single point in time, while food waste prevention practices, donation guidance, and related policies may continue to change as new resources and regulations occur. Despite these limitations, the results provide meaningful insight into partner needs and opportunities for improving food date label education and Food Waste Prevention Week engagement.

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Appendix A. Supplementary Figures

Figure 1. Top Generators of Estimated Excess Food at Restaurants and Educational Institutions across Washington's Counties

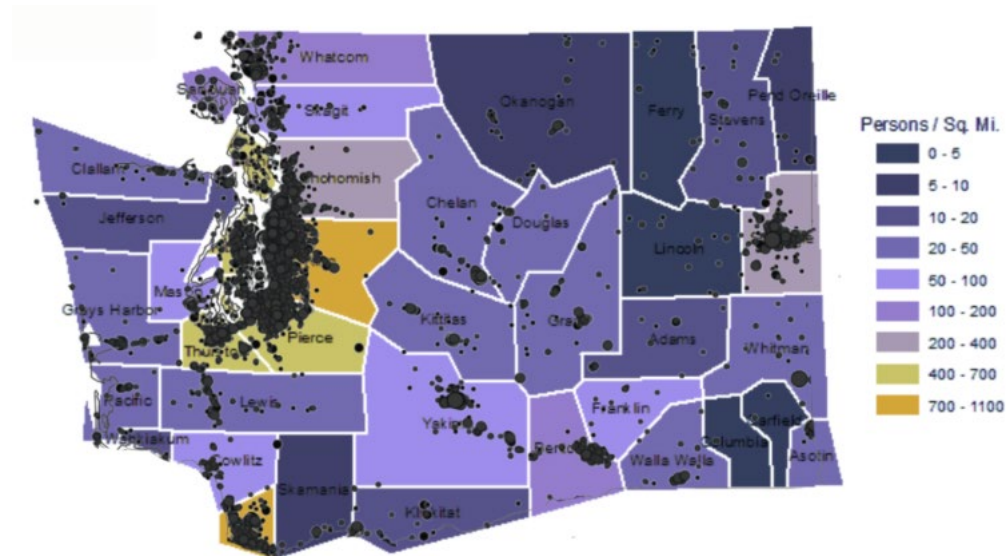
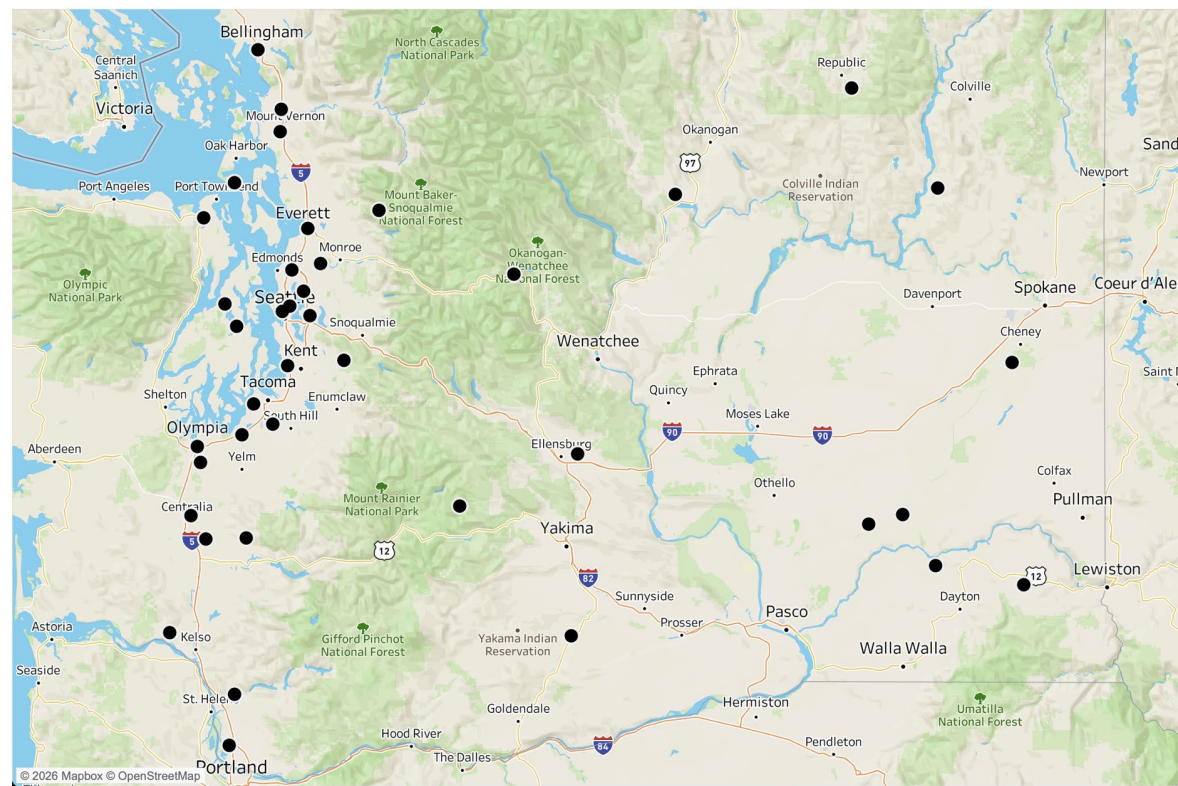


Figure 2. Distribution of Participants ZIP Codes Across Washington State



Appendix B. Supplementary Tables

Table 1. Survey Questions for Partners at Schools and Restaurants

Question	Expected Takeaway	Variable
GQ1. Which best describes your organization? Response options: K-12 School or school district; College or University; Food-related business, e.g., restaurant or grocery; Food-related nonprofit/community organization; Other.	<i>Participant Information:</i> This branching question placed participants into a school or restaurant category.	<i>General:</i> This question informs understanding of the secondary research question: How do key partner demographics and geography influence engagement with food date label messaging?
SQ1. Which of the following best describes your role in your organization? Response options: School nutrition, food service staff; Facilities or operations staff; Sustainability/environmental staff; Administrator; Teacher or faculty; Student group or club advisor/mentor; Other.	<i>Participant Information:</i> This question categorized participants as front-line versus operations or administrative staff members.	<i>General:</i> This question informs understanding of the secondary research question: How do key partner demographics and geography influence engagement with food date label messaging?
SQ2. What is the name of your school or school district? Response options: Open-ended.	<i>Participant Information:</i> This question noted the region of each participant's school location.	<i>Demographics (4):</i> This question was included to collect specific information regarding partner regionality.
SQ3a. Does your school/school district provide any information or education about food waste? Response options: Yes, only messages; Yes, only teach; Yes, both; Unsure; No.	<i>Internal Processes:</i> This question inquired about each school's specific educational practices and policies.	<i>Messaging (3):</i> This question was designed to identify existing food waste messaging at schools.
SQ3b. Does your school/school district message or teach about food date labels (e.g., "Best By," "Use By," "Sell By")? Response options: Yes, only	<i>Internal Processes:</i> This question inquired about each school's specific policies and procedures.	<i>Messaging (3):</i> This question was designed to identify existing date label messaging at schools.

messages; Yes, only teach; Yes, both messages and teach; Unsure; No.		
SQ4. [Show if select a “Yes” answer in SQ3B] How does your school share food date label information? Response options: Vending/retail dining areas; Staff training, nutrition services/food service; Guidance for teachers/administrators; Classroom instruction or curriculum; Family communications, newsletters or flyers; Other.	<i>Internal Processes:</i> This question inquired about each school’s specific policies and procedures.	<i>Messaging (3):</i> This question was designed to identify existing date label messaging at schools.
SQ5. Where would you place your school/school district on the following scale regarding food waste awareness, messaging, teaching, and prevention practices? Response options: Unaware; Aware but not engaged; Aware and monitoring; Messaging; Messaging and changing practices; Messaging, teaching, and changing practices; Active engagement in all options, and evaluating their effectiveness.	<i>Internal Processes:</i> This question inquired about each school’s specific policies and procedures.	<i>Messaging (3):</i> This question was designed to identify existing food waste messaging and practices at schools.
SQ6. Which of the following would most improve your school/school district’s efforts to reduce food waste? Response options: Increased staff time/capacity; Increased storage/cold storage capacity; Ready-to-use educational materials/signage; Clearer food safety messaging for students at school; Clearer food safety messaging for staff and faculty; Clearer food safety messaging for families; Simpler donation acceptance rules; Not applicable; Other.	<i>Internal Processes:</i> This question inquired about each school’s specific policies and procedures.	<i>Food Waste (2):</i> This question was created to pinpoint processes that can simplify food waste reduction at schools.
SQ7. When deciding whether to keep,	<i>Internal Processes:</i> This question	<i>Food Waste (2):</i> This question was

serve, send home, or donate food from your school food services, which factors matter most at your school? Response options: Printed food date label; Appearance/visual check; Smell/sensory cues; Packaging integrity; Storage conditions/time; Internal policies/SOPs; USDA/State food safety guidance; Student/family expectations; Liability concerns; Staff training level; Other.	inquired about each school's specific policies and procedures.	created to pinpoint existing processes that influence food-related decisions at schools.
SQ8. When food looks/smells normal and has been stored safely, how confident do you feel using/serving it past a "Best By/Best Before" date? Response options: Very confident; Somewhat confident; Neutral; Not very confident; Not confident at all.	<i>Individual Confidence:</i> This question was designed to connect personal perspectives and actions for those who work with food.	<i>Date Labels (1):</i> This question seeks to identify how date labeling impacts individual decision-making.
SQ9. Does your school have internal policies affecting how you use or discard food based on food date labels? Response options: Yes; No; Unsure.	<i>Internal Processes:</i> This question inquired about each school's specific policies and procedures.	<i>Date Labels (1):</i> This question aims to clarify school policies regarding food usage with respect to date labels.
SQ10. If you receive donated food, how do food date labels affect acceptance/use? Response options: Accept past-date items if safe; Accept only before the printed date; Reject past-date items; Case-by-case decision; Not applicable.	<i>Internal Processes:</i> This question inquired about each school's specific policies and procedures.	<i>Date Labels (1):</i> This question aims to clarify school policies regarding food usage with respect to date labels.
BQ1. Which of the following best describes your role in your organization? Response options: Owner/manager; Operations manager; Kitchen/food service staff; QA/Food safety; Sustainability/waste management;	<i>Participant Information:</i> This question categorized participants as front-line versus operations or administrative staff members.	<i>General:</i> This question does not correspond with any research questions.

Other.		
BQ2. What type of food business do you work in? Response options: Restaurant/food service; Grocery/food retail; Manufacturing/processing; Distribution/wholesale; Other.	<i>Participant Information:</i> This question further categorized participants' specific sectors.	<i>General:</i> This question does not correspond with any research questions.
BQ3a. Does your organization provide guidance/messaging related to food waste to staff or customers? Response options: Yes; No; Unsure.	<i>Internal Processes:</i> This question inquired about each restaurant's specific policies and procedures.	<i>Messaging (3):</i> This question was designed to identify existing food waste messaging at restaurants.
BQ3b. Does your organization provide guidance/messaging related to food date labels (e.g., "Best By," "Use By," "Sell By") to staff or customers? Response options: Yes; No; Unsure.	<i>Internal Processes:</i> This question inquired about each restaurant's specific policies and procedures.	<i>Messaging (3):</i> This question was designed to identify existing date label messaging at restaurants.
BQ4a. Does your business PRINT or APPLY date labels on products? Yes, we set/apply date labels; No; Unsure.	<i>Internal Processes:</i> This question inquired about each restaurant's specific policies and procedures.	<i>Date Labels (1):</i> This question aims to clarify restaurant policies regarding food usage with respect to date labels.
BQ4b [If yes to BQ4a]: Which terms are used most in those labels? Response options: Best By/Best Before, quality; Use By, safety/ready-to-eat; Sell By, inventory; Prepared On / Use Within X days; Freeze By; Other	<i>Internal Processes:</i> This question inquired about each restaurant's specific policies and procedures.	<i>Date Labels (1):</i> This question aims to clarify restaurant policies regarding food usage with respect to date labels.
BQ5. Which of the following impede food waste reduction efforts in your organization? Response options: Food safety concerns; Regulatory uncertainty; Liability concerns; Customer misunderstanding; Limited staff time; Inventory/rotation constraints;	<i>Internal Processes:</i> This question inquired about each restaurant's specific policies and procedures.	<i>Food Waste (2):</i> This question was created to pinpoint processes that can simplify food waste reduction at restaurants.

Donation logistics/quality standards; None of the above; Other.		
BQ6. Which factors most affect your food waste decisions in your organization? Response options: Printed date label; Appearance/visual check; Smell/sensory cues; Packaging integrity; Storage/HACCP logs; Internal policy/SOPs; Customer expectations/brand protection; Liability/insurance; Staff training level; Other.	<i>Internal Processes:</i> This question inquired about each restaurant's specific policies and procedures.	<i>Food Waste (2):</i> This question was created to pinpoint existing processes that influence food-related decisions at restaurants.
BQ7. When food appears safe and has been stored properly, how confident are you using/serving it past "Best By/Best Before"? Response options: Very confident; Somewhat confident; Neutral; Not very confident; Not confident at all.	<i>Individual Confidence:</i> This question was designed to connect personal perspectives and actions for those who work with food.	<i>Date Labels (1):</i> This question seeks to identify how date labeling impacts individual decision-making.
BQ8. Does your organization have internal policies affecting how you use, discard, or donate food based on food date labels? Response options: Yes; No; Unsure.	<i>Internal Processes:</i> This question inquired about each restaurant's specific policies and procedures.	<i>Date Labels (1):</i> This question aims to clarify restaurant policies regarding food usage with respect to date labels.
BQ9. If you donate food, how do food date labels affect acceptance/use, to the best of your knowledge? Response options: Accept past-date items if safe; Accept only before printed date; Reject past-date items; Case-by-case; Not applicable.	<i>Internal Processes:</i> This question inquired about each restaurant's specific policies and procedures.	<i>Date Labels (1):</i> This question aims to clarify restaurant policies regarding food usage with respect to date labels.
BQ10. Which of the following would most improve your organization's efforts to reduce food waste? Response options: Decision tree for staff; Visual examples of quality vs.	<i>Internal Processes:</i> This question inquired about each restaurant's specific policies and procedures.	<i>Food Waste (2):</i> This question was created to pinpoint processes that can simplify food waste reduction at restaurants.

spoilage; Sensory evaluation training; Donation eligibility guidance, Good Samaritan clarity; Customer-facing signage/templates; Integration into CFPM/Food Worker training; Policy/SOP update support; Other.		
BQ11. What training have you received related to food safety labels or food date labels? Response options: Certified Food Protection Manager, CFPM; Food Worker Card; Internal SOP/HACCP training; Voluntary or supplemental trainings; Not applicable; Other.	<i>Internal Processes:</i> This question inquired about each restaurant's specific policies and procedures.	<i>Messaging (3):</i> This question was designed to identify existing date label messaging at restaurants.
GQ2. Before today, were you aware of Food Waste Prevention Week? Response options: Yes; No; Not sure.	<i>Campaign Awareness:</i> This question identified familiarity with existing food waste prevention efforts and events.	<i>Engagement (4):</i> This question was intended to assess partner awareness of Food Waste Prevention Week, specifically.
GQ3. Before today, had you heard of Food Safety Month (September)? Response options: Yes; No; Not sure.	<i>Campaign Awareness:</i> This question identified familiarity with existing food waste prevention efforts and events.	<i>Engagement (4):</i> This question was intended to assess partner awareness of Food Safety Month, specifically.
GQ4. Has your organization ever participated in Food Waste Prevention Week? Response options: Yes; No; Not sure.	<i>Campaign Awareness:</i> This question identified familiarity with existing food waste prevention efforts and events.	<i>Engagement (4):</i> This question was intended to assess partner participation in Food Waste Prevention Week, specifically.
GQ5. [If no] Which of the following has made it difficult for your organization to participate in Food Waste Prevention Week? Response options: Not aware of it; Not sure what participation involves; Limited staff time/capacity; Unclear who would lead my organization's participation; Limited awareness/understanding of food date labeling; Geographic/logistical constraints; Other.	<i>Campaign Awareness:</i> This question identified barriers to existing food waste prevention efforts and events.	<i>Engagement (4):</i> This question was intended to assess existing barriers to partner attendance at Food Waste Prevention Week.

GQ6. Which of the following would help motivate your organization to participate? Response options: Ready-to-use messaging templates for students/families/clients/customers; Posters/signage templates; Ready-to-use educational materials for staff; Ready-to-use educational materials for students/families/clients/customers; Simple guide for participating in Food Waste Prevention Week; Recognition/certificates for participating in Food Waste Prevention Week; Virtual options for participating in Food Waste Prevention Week; Other.	<i>Campaign Awareness:</i> This question identified opportunities for existing food waste prevention efforts and events.	<i>Engagement (4):</i> This question was intended to assess potential improvements to partner attendance at Food Waste Prevention Week.
GQ7. Where is your organization located? Response options: Washington county dropdown.	<i>Participant Information:</i> This question noted the region of each participant's location.	<i>Demographics (4):</i> This question was included to collect specific information regarding partner regionality.
GQ8. What is your organization's zip code? Response options: Open-ended.	<i>Participant Information:</i> This question noted the region of each participant's location.	<i>Demographics (4):</i> This question was included to collect specific information regarding partner regionality.
GQ9. What is the approximate number of staff in your organization? Response options: Open-ended numeric response.	<i>Participant Information:</i> This question noted the size of each participant's place of work.	<i>Demographics (4):</i> This question was included to collect specific information regarding partner size and capacity.
GQ10. We welcome your suggestions for anything else state agencies or partners should know to support your food waste reduction efforts? Response options: Open-ended.	<i>Participant Information:</i> This question was made available for participants sharing support needs in a more narrative format.	<i>Engagement (4):</i> This question was intended to illuminate additional opportunities to increase accessibility of food waste reduction.
GQ11. May we contact you for a brief follow-up (20–30 min interview) to	<i>Interview Interest:</i> This question was made available for	<i>General:</i> This question does not correspond with any research

better understand your responses? Response options: Yes; No.	participants interested in further engagement.	questions.
GQ12. Thank you for your willingness to participate in a follow-up interview. Please provide your name and preferred contact information. Response options: Open-ended.	<i>Interview Interest:</i> This question was made available for participants interested in further engagement.	<i>General:</i> This question does not correspond with any research questions.

Table 2. Interview Questions with Partners at Schools

Question	Expected Takeaway	Variable
Q1. Can you briefly describe your role and how you interact with food at school, if at all?	<i>Participant Information:</i> This question categorized participants as front-line versus operations or administrative staff members.	<i>General:</i> This question informs understanding of the secondary research question: How do key partner demographics and geography influence engagement with food date label messaging?
Q2. How are decisions usually made about using, sharing, or throwing away food?	<i>Internal Processes:</i> This question inquired about each school's specific policies and procedures.	<i>Food Waste (2):</i> This question was created to pinpoint existing processes that influence food-related decisions at schools.
Q3. What factors help you decide whether a food item is kept or discarded? For example, packaging, appearance, expiration date, and food labels.	<i>Individual Confidence:</i> This question was designed to connect personal perspectives and actions for those who work with food.	<i>Food Waste (2):</i> This question was created to pinpoint personal perspectives that influence food-related decisions at schools.
Q4. What do "best by" and "use by" labels on food mean to you?	<i>Individual Confidence:</i> This question was designed to connect personal understanding of food date label meanings.	<i>Date Labels (1):</i> This question seeks to identify how date labeling impacts individual decision making.
Q5: Have food date labels ever made you feel unsure about whether food was still okay to use or serve? Q5a: If so, what did you do? Can you describe the situation or share an	<i>Individual Confidence:</i> This question was designed to connect personal understanding of food date label meanings with actions.	<i>Date Labels (1):</i> This question seeks to identify how date labeling impacts individual decision making.

example?		
Q6: If food is past the date on the label but still looks edible, what would you usually do?	<i>Individual Confidence:</i> This question was designed to connect personal understanding of food date label meanings with actions.	<i>Date Labels (1):</i> This question seeks to identify how date labeling impacts individual decision making.
Q7. Have you seen any messages, posters, or information about food waste or food date labels in your school or elsewhere in the environment? Q7a. Are those messages clear and easy to understand? Q7b. What would make those messages clearer and more useful?	<i>Internal Processes:</i> This question inquired about each school's specific messaging practices.	<i>Messaging (3):</i> This question was designed to identify existing food waste messaging at schools.
Q8. Have you ever been in a situation where food could be shared, redistributed, or donated instead of being thrown away? Q8a. If so, can you further describe the situation?	<i>Internal Processes:</i> school-specific policies, procedures, and operational conditions related to reducing food waste, redistributing surplus food, and donating edible food instead of discarding it.	<i>Food Waste (2):</i> This question was created to pinpoint existing processes that influence food-related decisions at schools.
Q9. How does the food label affect the food that could be shared, redistributed, or donated for your organization?	<i>Internal Processes:</i> This question inquired about each school's specific policies and procedures about alternatives to food waste	<i>Date Labels (1):</i> This question aims to clarify school policies regarding food usage with respect to date labels.
Q10. What makes it difficult for you to reduce food waste in your day-to-day work environment?	<i>Individual Confidence:</i> This question showcases personal perspectives on barriers to progress.	<i>Food Waste (2):</i> This question was created to pinpoint existing challenges that influence food-related decisions at schools.
Q11. Have you seen any messages (like posters or signage) about food date labels for businesses? Q11a. If so, were they clear and helpful? Q11b. What would make messages about food date labels clearer and	<i>Internal Processes:</i> This question inquired about each school's specific policies and procedures.	<i>Messaging (3):</i> This question was designed to identify existing food waste messaging at schools.

more useful?		
Q12. What kinds of support, tools, or guidance would help improve your organization's efforts toward food waste reduction?	<i>Internal Processes:</i> This question inquired about each school's specific policies and procedures.	<i>Engagement (4):</i> This question was drafted to highlight additional opportunities to increase accessibility of food waste reduction efforts and events.

Table 3. Interview Questions with Partners at Restaurants

Question	Expected Takeaway	Variable
Q1. Can you briefly describe your role and how you interact with food, inventory, or customers in your work?	<i>Participant Information:</i> This question categorized participants as front-line versus operations or administrative staff members.	<i>General:</i> This question does not correspond with any research questions.
Q2. How are decisions usually made about using, selling, or throwing away food?	<i>Internal Processes:</i> This question inquired about each restaurant's specific policies and procedures regarding food waste decisions.	<i>Food Waste (2):</i> This question was created to pinpoint existing processes that influence food-related decisions at restaurants.
Q3. What factors help you decide if food should be kept or discarded (team examples: packaging, dates, labels, appearance)?	<i>Individual Confidence:</i> This question was designed to connect personal perspectives and actions for those who work with food.	<i>Food Waste (2):</i> This question was created to pinpoint personal perspectives that influence food-related decisions at restaurants.
Q4. What do “best by” and “use by” labels on food mean to you?	<i>Individual Confidence:</i> This question was designed to connect personal understanding of food date label meanings.	<i>Date Labels (1):</i> This question seeks to identify how date labeling impacts individual decision-making.
Q5. Have food date labels ever made you feel unsure about whether food was still okay to use or serve? Q5a. Can you share an example?	<i>Individual Confidence:</i> This question was designed to connect personal understanding of food date label meanings with actions.	<i>Date Labels (1):</i> This question seeks to identify how date labeling impacts individual decision-making.
Q6: Can you describe a time you were not sure about a food item? Q6a. What did you do?	<i>Individual Confidence:</i> This question was designed to connect personal understanding of food date label meanings with actions.	<i>Date Labels (1):</i> This question seeks to identify how date labeling impacts individual decision-making.
Q7: If food is past the date on the label but still looks okay, what would you usually do?	<i>Individual Confidence:</i> This question was designed to connect personal understanding of food date label meanings with actions.	<i>Date Labels (1):</i> This question seeks to identify how date labeling impacts individual decision-making.
Q8. Does your business have any internal policies or daily practices that affect how food is used, donated, or discarded based on date labels?	<i>Internal Processes:</i> This question inquired about each restaurant's specific policies and procedures.	<i>Date Labels (1):</i> This question aims to clarify restaurant policies regarding food usage with respect to date labels.

Q9. Have you ever seen or been part of a situation where food was shared, redistributed, or donated instead of being thrown away? Q9a. If yes, can you describe what happened?	<i>Internal Processes:</i> This question inquired about each restaurant's specific policies and procedures.	<i>Food Waste (2):</i> This question was created to pinpoint existing processes that influence food-related decisions at restaurants.
Q10. How do food date labels affect whether food from your business can be shared or donated?	<i>Internal Processes:</i> This question inquired about each restaurant's specific policies and procedures.	<i>Date Labels (1):</i> This question aims to clarify restaurant policies regarding food usage with respect to date labels.
Q11. What makes it difficult for you to reduce food waste in your business?	<i>Individual Confidence:</i> This question showcases personal perspectives on barriers to progress.	<i>Food Waste (2):</i> This question was created to pinpoint existing challenges that influence food-related decisions at restaurants.
Q12. Have you seen any messages (like posters or signage) about food date labels for businesses? Q12a. If so, were they clear and helpful? Q12b. What would make messages about food date labels clearer and more useful?	<i>Internal Processes:</i> This question inquired about each restaurant's specific policies and procedures.	<i>Messaging (3):</i> This question was designed to identify existing food waste messaging at restaurants.
Q13. What kinds of support, tools, or guidance would help your business further engage in food waste reduction?	<i>Internal Processes:</i> This question inquired about each restaurant's specific policies and procedures.	<i>Engagement (4):</i> This question was drafted to highlight additional opportunities to increase accessibility of food waste reduction efforts and events.

Table 4. Food Waste Prevention Week and Food Safety Month Awareness and Participation, (Total N=52).

Category	Yes	No	Not Sure	Total
Food Waste Prevention Week Awareness	24	28	—	52
Food Safety Month Awareness	25	27	—	52
Organization Participation (FWPW)	18	25	9	52

Category - Breakdowns	Yes	No	Not Sure
Food Waste Prevention Week Awareness (N=52)	24 (46%)	28 (54%)	-
Schools (n=37)	14(37.8%)	23(62.2 %)	-
Restaurants (n=6)	2 (33.3%)	4 (66.7%)	-
Food-related NPO or CBO, Other (n=9)	8 (88.9%)	1 (11.1%)	-
Food Safety Month Awareness (N=52)	25 (48%)	27 (52%)	-
Schools (n=37)	18 (49%)	19 (51%)	-
Restaurants (n=6)	2 (33%)	4 (67%)	-
Food-related NPO or CBO, Other (n=9)	5 (56%)	4 (44%)	-
Organization Participation (FWPW)	18 (34.6%)	25 (48.1%)	9(17.3%)
Schools (n=37)	10 (27.0%)	21 (56.8%)	6(16.2%)
Restaurants (n=6)	2 (33.3%)	2 (33.3%)	2(33.3%)
Food-related NPO or CBO, Other (n=9)	6 (66.7%)	2 (22.2%)	1(11.1%)

Table 5. Comparison of Food Waste Education and Food Date Label Education offerings for Schools

Education type	Yes	No	Unsure
Food Waste Education	56.8%	21.6%	21.6%
Food Date Label Education	35.1%	27.0%	37.8%

The percentages above were calculated based on valid responses to the questions “Does your school/school district provide any messages or teach about food waste?” and “Does your school/school district message or teach about food date labels ” education, for schools (n = 37).

Table 6. Decision Factors Affecting Food Use, Disposal, and Donation in School Settings

Decision Factor	Count	Percent of Responses
USDA or State food safety guidance	27	73.0%
Printed food date label	25	67.6%
Storage conditions or time	24	64.9%
Internal policies or SOPs	21	56.8%
Liability concerns	20	54.1%
Packaging integrity	20	54.1%
Appearance or visual check	17	45.9%
Smell or sensory cues	13	35.1%
Student or family expectations	8	21.6%
Staff training level	7	18.9%

Percentages were calculated from responses to the question, “Decision factors in school settings. When deciding whether to keep, serve, send home, or donate food from your school food services, which factors matter most at your school? (Select all that apply)” (n = 37).

Respondents could select multiple options.

Table 7. Decision Factors Affecting Food Waste Decisions among Business Respondents

Decision Factor	Count	Percent of Responses
Printed date label	5	83.3%
Internal policy or SOPs	3	50.0%
Appearance or visual check	2	33.3%
Customer expectations or brand protection	2	33.3%
Smell or sensory cues	1	16.7%
Storage or HACCP logs	1	16.7%
Staff training level	1	16.7%

The percentages above were calculated among valid business responses to the decision factors question, n = 6. Respondents could select multiple options. Findings should be interpreted cautiously because of the small sample size.

Table 8. Support Needs for Food Waste Reduction in School Settings

Support	Count	Percent of responses
Ready-to-use educational materials/signage	22	59.5%
Clearer food safety messaging for students	13	35.1%
Clearer food safety messaging for staff and faculty	12	32.4%
Increased staff time/capacity	12	32.4%
Simpler donation acceptance rules	11	29.7%
Clearer food safety messaging for families	8	21.6%
Increased storage/cold storage capacity	5	13.5%

The percentages above—were calculated from valid responses to the school support needs question, n = 37. Respondents could select multiple options.

Table 9. Support Needs for Food Waste Reduction among Business Respondents

Barrier	Count	Percent of Responses
Food safety concerns	4	66.7%
Donation logistics or quality standards	3	50.0%
Limited staff time	3	50.0%
Regulatory uncertainty	3	50.0%
Inventory or rotation constraints	2	33.3%
Customer misunderstanding	1	16.7%
Liability concerns	1	16.7%

The percentages above were calculated among valid business responses, n = 6.

Table 10. Business Support Needs

Support	Count	Percent of Responses
Integration into CFPM/Food Worker training	3	50.0%
Customer-facing signage/templates	2	33.3%
Donation eligibility guidance, Good Samaritan clarity	2	33.3%
Policy/SOP update support	2	33.3%
Decision tree for staff	1	16.7%
More frequent pickups	1	16.7%
Nothing needed at this time	1	16.7%

Table 11. Motivators for Participation in Food Waste Prevention Week

Group	Ready-to-use educational materials and a simple participation guide	Posters/signage templates	Ready to use messaging templates	Ready to use educational materials for staff	Virtual options for participating	Recognition/certificates
Schools (n=37)	22 (59.5%)	19 (51.4%)	20 (54.1%)	16 (43.2%)	12 (32.4%)	10 (27.0%)
Business (n=6)	5 (83.3%)	5 (83.3%)	3 (50.0%)	4 (66.7%)	1 (16.7%)	1 (16.7%)
NPO/CBO + Other (n=9)	8 (88.9%)	7 (77.8%)	7 (77.8%)	7 (77.8%)	4 (44.4%)	4 (44.4%)

Percentages for “All respondents” are calculated using the full sample (N=52). Percentages by sector are calculated within each respondent group. Respondents could select multiple motivators.

Table 12. Analysis of Qualitative Interview Content

Qualitative Theme	Related Interview Topics	What This Theme Explores	Key Interview Insights	Implications for Recommendations	Relevant Partners
Date Label Understanding and Education	Meaning of “Best By,” “Use By,” expiration dates, and date label confusion	How partners understand date labels and whether they view them as quality, safety, or operational indicators.	Many participants understood “Best By” as a quality marker, but noted that consumers, students, and food recipients often treat date labels as strict safety deadlines.	Use plain-language messaging to distinguish quality-based and safety-related labels, with examples by food type.	Schools, businesses, food banks, community educators
Food Safety and Decision-Making	Smell, appearance, taste, packaging, storage, high-risk foods	What factors partners use when deciding whether food can be used, served, shared, or discarded.	Participants often relied on sensory checks and storage conditions, but professional food settings were more cautious with meat, seafood, dairy, opened packages, and prepared foods.	Pair date label education with practical food safety guidance, especially for higher-risk items	Restaurants, schools, food service programs, households
Food Waste Prevention Practices	Batch cooking, repurposing, freezing, specials, composting, AI tracking	Daily practices are used to prevent edible food from becoming a waste.	Businesses and food service programs used operational strategies such as forecasting, small batches, freezing, repurposing, employee meals, donations, composting, and pig buckets.	Share practical examples and simple workflow tools that businesses can adapt to their own operations.	Restaurants, cafes, university dining, caterers

Donation and Redistribution Practices	Food banks, gleaners, community fridges, school share tables, animal feed	When and how surplus food can be shared, donated, or redirected.	Participants described donations through food banks, gleaners, community fridges, and hunger relief partners, but noted barriers around policy uncertainty, capacity, liability, and dignity.	Clarify donation pathways, safety expectations, liability protections, and school share-table guidance.	Food recovery organizations, schools, restaurants, food banks
Barriers to Reducing Food Waste	Demand uncertainty, storage, staff training, health code concerns, label visibility	Practical and institutional challenges that limit food waste reduction.	Key barriers included unpredictable demand, limited storage, inconsistent labels, staff training needs, unclear rules, and concerns about health codes or liability.	Tailor outreach to operational realities rather than relying only on general awareness messaging.	Businesses, schools, health departments, state agencies
Support, Tools and Outreach Needs	Posters, templates, training, school education, business guidance	What support would help partners act more consistently.	Participants wanted clearer, more visible, and more customizable tools, including posters, infographics, staff training, school lessons, and donation guidance.	Create adaptable outreach materials and partner-specific toolkits for schools, businesses, and community partners.	Schools, businesses, community educators, state outreach programs

Table 13. Assessment and Comparison of Outreach Materials and Engagement Strategies

Organization/Source	Material Type	Target Audience	Message Framing/Mean Focus	Strengths	Limitation/Gaps	Lessons
Washington Department of Ecology, Food Center / Use Food Well	Public-facing webpages, food storage guide, partner toolkit	Washington households, families, residents, partners, and businesses	Reducing food waste through practical household actions, especially saving money, planning meals, storing food properly, using food before it spoils, and sharing campaign messages through partners	Strong practical orientation. The Food Storage Guide gives clear, visual tips for common foods, such as apples, bananas, potatoes, onions, meat, eggs, dairy, and bread. The Partner Toolkit is also useful because it gives partners ready-to-use key messages, talking points, social media posts, newsletter language, hashtags, and links to campaign materials.	The materials are helpful and easy to share, but they are mostly organized around general household behavior and campaign promotion. They provide less detailed guidance for different settings, such as schools, grocery stores, restaurants, and food donation partners.	Keep the practical and cost-saving framing, but consider adding more audience-specific versions. Peer materials show that outreach can be stronger when it gives each audience a clear role, such as household user, school staff, grocery employee, business owner, or food donation partner.
EPA, Food: Too Good to Waste	Implementation guide and household behavior-change toolkit	Local governments, community organizations, households, and campaign implementers	Community-based social marketing, household food waste tracking, smart shopping, smart storage, prep, and “eat first” prompts	Strongest as a behavior-change model. It connects outreach materials to specific behaviors and includes tools for implementation, recruitment, participant retention, data collection, and	More demanding to implement than a simple awareness campaign. The measurement challenge requires time, participant follow-up, and data collection, which may be harder for broad public outreach.	Food Center could borrow the structure of linking each material to a specific behavior and evaluation goal. For example, storage tips could be paired with a simple pledge, checklist, or follow-up question to learn whether people used the material.

				evaluation. The guide explicitly says the toolkit is designed to help households reduce wasted food and help local governments and community organizations implement a campaign.		
Oregon DEQ, Wasted Food Wasted Money	Commercial food waste reduction campaign toolkit	Local governments, restaurants, grocery stores, and commercial food service providers	Business case for reducing wasted food, especially saving money, measuring waste, engaging staff, and documenting progress	Very strong partner-ready design. The toolkit includes flyers, bill inserts, postcards, a measurement tool, a one-week measurement challenge, sample press release, web copy, resource guides, ads, photo library, and a sample plan. It is also designed to be customizable by local governments and partner agencies.	The focus is mainly commercial food waste reduction, so it is less useful for household-facing outreach. It is also more campaign-infrastructure oriented than simple public education.	This is a useful model for Food Center partner materials. Food Center could make materials easier for partners to adopt by offering more customizable flyers, web copy, press language, ads, and measurement tools in one organized package.
Seattle Public Utilities, Food Donation Training	Training slides, store templates, signage, contact sheet	Grocery store staff, store managers, food donation leads, and food bank partners	Standardizing food donation practices inside stores, improving donation quality, clarifying what can and cannot	Strong operational focus. The training includes editable instructions, store-specific customization, partner information,	It is highly specific to grocery donation operations, so it may not translate directly to general food waste prevention outreach. It	Food Center could use this as a model for business-facing and donor-facing materials. The strongest lesson is to move beyond awareness and provide

			be donated, and strengthening communication with food bank partners	donation guidelines by department, signage, contact sheets, and pickup logs. It also uses simple quality prompts like “Would you eat it?” and “Would you serve it to your grandma?”	also assumes a store already has or is developing a donation system.	staff-ready tools, such as department-specific guidance, signs, logs, and partner contact templates.
King County Green Schools Program, Food Scrap Collection in Schools	Step-by-step school implementation guide	School administrators, district staff, custodians, food service staff, teachers, students, parents, and student monitors	Building buy-in, setting up school food scrap collection, training monitors, using signs and announcements, and maintaining the program	Strong audience segmentation within one setting. The guide clearly explains who needs to be involved, how to recruit and train monitors, how to plan signs and announcements, and how to maintain the program after launch. It emphasizes that support from principals, custodians, and other staff is critical.	It focuses on food scrap collection rather than edible food waste prevention or date label education. It is also more implementation-heavy than a general outreach handout.	Food Center could apply this school-based structure to future materials. For schools, outreach may work better when it gives separate roles to administrators, teachers, cafeteria staff, students, and parents instead of using one general message for everyone.
New York State DEC, Food Donation and Food Scraps Recycling Law Guidance	Business guidance handbook	Designated food scraps generators, food service businesses, grocery stores, institutions, and food	Compliance, food waste reduction, food donation, food safety, liability protection, staff training, and food scraps recycling	Strong at explaining complex requirements in a practical sequence. It covers food waste reduction, food donation, and food scraps recycling, and gives businesses	Because it covers many topics, it is longer and less immediately accessible than a short outreach tool. Some users may need a shorter checklist or quick-start version.	Food Center could use this as a model for business-facing guidance, but translate longer policy guidance into shorter tools. A layered approach may work best: a short flyer or checklist first, with

		donation partners		concrete steps on food safety, labeling, storing, transporting, partner communication, signage, SOPs, and staff training.		a longer guide for businesses that need details.
NRDC, Tackling Food Waste in Cities	Policy and program toolkit	City policymakers, municipal staff, local governments, community partners, businesses, institutions, and food rescue partners	Food waste reduction through prevention, food donation, food rescue, organics recycling, policy planning, partner coordination, and measurable program implementation	Strong comprehensive framework. The toolkit organizes food waste reduction into foundational, ambitious, and transformative strategies, including public education, support for businesses and institutions, food rescue system capacity, and safe food donation. It is useful for connecting outreach with policy, implementation planning, and evaluation.	The toolkit is city-focused and broader than Food Waste Prevention Week, so some guidance would need to be adapted for Washington's statewide outreach context and for school- or restaurant-specific materials.	Food Center could use this as a model for connecting outreach materials with broader program design. It also reinforces the value of clear partner roles, food rescue coordination, technical assistance for businesses and institutions, and measurable goals for long-term food waste reduction.