

WHEN IT IS ILLEGAL TO WASTE FOOD

By supermarkets, that is. Timothy Baster and Isabelle Merminod on the progress of a much-lauded French law.

The French law against food waste – a world first – came into effect on 11 February 2016 and was greeted with acclaim by the international press. The law forbids supermarkets to destroy or throw away products approaching their sell-by date. If the food cannot be donated, it goes for animal feed or is composted to produce methane fuel.

Before the law was enacted, some supermarkets had been sprinkling liquid bleach on food to stop people rummaging through their waste bins.

As it came into effect, food banks, which have operated in France since the 1980s, voiced concerns about becoming dumping grounds for huge volumes of supermarket produce.

So how has it worked out?

Citing the anti-waste law, the national French Food Bank Federation noted an 11-per-cent increase in food donations in 2017.¹ Donations come from supermarkets, wholesalers and the EU.

Denis Bastouill runs a food bank in Pyrénées-Orientales, a poor region close to the Spanish border with a population of about 450,000. Some 13 per cent of France's citizens live below the poverty threshold (which is calculated at 60 per cent of median income).² In Pyrénées-Orientales it is over 20 per cent.

According to Bastouill, the very large out-of-town supermarkets already had agreements with the national food bank federation before the 2016 law. 'Up until then we collected only from the very large supermarkets,' he said. 'The [anti-waste] law forced smaller supermarkets to recycle. The main impact of the law was on the medium-size and smaller supermarkets.'



Unsaleable fruit at the wholesale food market of Rungis, Paris, gets sorted so that what is still usable can go to food banks.

MARTIN BUREAU/AFP/GETTY

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The food bank Bastouill runs in Pyrénées-Orientales is impressive. It has 7 paid staff, 80 volunteers and 60 suppliers, with 57 charities or local town halls receiving food. Their vans collect and distribute seven tonnes of food per day – sufficient for some 15,000 meals. They charge a nominal 10 euro cents (\$0.11) per kilo to the participating charities or town halls.

The supplying supermarkets avoid disposal costs for their excess food and they gain tax deductions. 'We give them a "certificate of donation" which allows them to offset their gift,' said Bastouill.

According to Jacques Delpech of OASIS, a long-established food charity in the poorer north of Perpignan prefecture, the law has meant an increase in provisions. They now provide food for some 280 families per week, charging them only 24 euros (\$28) per month.

But are there unintended downsides to this law and the impressive work being done by food bank staff and volunteers?

Does it allow French politicians to ignore difficult, but socially just, solutions like tax reform and wage protection which might allow poorer people to buy what they want?

And, crucially, what happens to small-scale agricultural producers and local 'resilience' when huge supermarket chains with long environmentally unfriendly supply lines strengthen their role in French society through food banks while undermining more environmentally sound, local alternatives? ●

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¹ nin.tl/banque-alimentaire

² *Le Monde*, 4 September 2018, nin.tl/poverty-France