Food Waste Solutions Process

ReFresh Nebraska

Exploring Food Waste Issues | *Fall 2026*

American Households in 2026: Grocery Spending, Behavior Change, and Food Waste Reduction

The following is an Executive Summary of a ReFED Report
by Margaret Watkins, and Ana Gomez Lemmon Meyer

Nearly one-third of all food in the United States, valued at over $380 billion annually, is lost or wasted as it makes its way from farms to our plates (ReFED, 2026). The residential sector generates roughly one-third of this surplus, meaning Americans spend around $752 per person per year on food that ultimately goes uneaten. Because much of this consumer waste is driven by everyday decisions about what to buy, how to store it, and when to prepare and consume food, even small shifts in food shopping, preparation, and management behaviors have been found to reduce household food waste at scale (Schanes et al., 2018).

In April, ReFED released Progress on the Plate, our latest landscape assessment of food waste in the United States. We estimate that total surplus food across all sectors declined by 2.2% between 2023 and 2024, marking the first annual reduction since the COVID pandemic. Much of the progress occurred in homes, with Americans generating 950,000 fewer tons of food waste in 2024 than in the previous year, or about 2 ounces per person per week. This took place during a period of ongoing economic uncertainty. While year-over-year grocery inflation has eased, grocery prices remain roughly 30% higher than they were in early 2020 (BLS, 2026). This raises important questions about how pressures such as food prices and grocery spending shape food shopping, preparation, and management behaviors, and which of these behaviors are most closely linked to household food waste reduction.

To explore these dynamics further and to understand Americans' recent experiences, we partnered with YouGov, with support from the Ida & Robert Gordon Family Foundation, to carry out a nationally representative survey of 1,000 U.S. households. Conducted in January 2026, the survey asked respondents about their financial situation, grocery spending, food shopping, preparation, and management behaviors, as well as self-reported food waste, with a focus on how these have changed in the past twelve months.

What Our Survey Found

Over half of respondents (56%) self-reported wasting less food than a year ago. When households noticed a change in their grocery spending, they adjusted how they shop for food, and prepare and manage it at home, and reported wasting less food.

Survey Results

1 Over two-thirds of American households said their grocery spending changed in the past year, with 58% reporting it went up, and 93% of those attributing the increase to food prices.

Grocery prices were a significant source of budget strain for respondents in 2026, felt across income levels and self-reported financial situations. The median weekly grocery spend across all survey respondents was around $150, or $7,800 a year. For those reporting increased grocery spending, the median weekly increase was around $50, equivalent to $2,600 in additional grocery spending over the course of a year or roughly a third of a typical household's annual grocery budget.

2 Both households spending more and less on food adapted how they managed it, and reported wasting less.

Households spending more and households spending less represent two distinct responses to rising food prices. Households spending more (38% of households, with a median income of around $90,000) were largely able to absorb higher grocery prices. The increase was noticeable, however, and for many, it made food costs feel more important. As a result, most reported adapting how they shop for food, and prepare and manage it at home. Households spending less (11% of households, with a median income around $55,000) could not absorb the scale of this increase and instead reported actively cutting back on what they bought and changing how they managed food at home.

Households spending more on groceries were 29% more likely to report reduced waste than households with no change in grocery spending, and households spending less were 40% more likely. Among households that changed their grocery spending, those who attributed the change to food prices were 17% more likely to reduce food waste than those citing other reasons. Both groups reported wasting less, but through different behaviors, and those differences matter for how solutions should be designed and targeted.

3 Waste reduction is tied to stacking multiple small behavioral changes, not any single one.

Households that reported wasting less made multiple small changes. The behaviors households most consistently reported doing more often as a result of grocery prices were meal planning, using up leftovers, freezing food, checking what was already in the fridge, and choosing smaller/ package sizes. Each additional behavioral change increased the probability of reporting less waste by about 9% for households whose spending rose and by about 11% for those whose spending fell.

A household making three behavioral changes was therefore at least 24% more likely to report wasting less than a household not making any, with the cumulative effect even stronger (33%) for the spending-less group.

Meal planning and leftover use showed the highest probability of reduced waste and, therefore, should anchor practical guidance. Our survey results, along with the wider peer-reviewed literature, suggest that helping households adopt several practices together increases the probability of reducing food waste. Whole multiple behaviors may compound each other's effects. However, habit-formation research indicates that introducing changes gradually can improve the likelihood that new behaviors will persist over time.

4 Lower-income households face the greatest burden and stand to benefit most from targeted practical support.

The reported median increase in grocery spending was broadly similar across income levels (around $50 a week or $2,600 a year), but it affected households very differently depending on their income. For the roughly one in four American households earning less than $40,000 a year (approximately 32 million homes), their change in spending represents around 10% of annual income or the equivalent of more than a month of pre- tax earnings. For those earning $150,000 or more, the increase represents just 1.5%. The same dollar increase, therefore, hits the households least able to absorb it nearly seven times harder.

Households under greater financial pressure reported fewer behavioral changes overall, but each change corresponded to a greater probability of reporting less waste, suggesting that helping this group adopt even one or two additional behaviors could have an outsized impact. These households are already managing tight budgets, limited bandwidth, and high levels of stress, which can make it harder to plan ahead and harder to adopt and sustain multiple food management behaviors. Without support that addresses these barriers directly, food waste interventions targeted at lower-income households will hit a ceiling regardless of how well they are designed.

Implications

The findings point to opportunities for practitioners, policymakers, and food businesses to act. Households should not have to be under financial strain to see the value of food, adopt better food management habits, and waste less. Research has found that most American households significantly underestimate the cost of the food they waste (RITRE, 2023), and our survey suggests that sustained grocery price pressure may have made food costs more noticeable, creating a window of opportunity to frame food waste reduction as part of an affordability agenda.

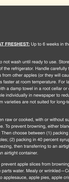
To see the report in its entirety, go to https://refed.org/uploads/2026-refed-shopping-survey-report-final.pdf



Shopping your fridge first is an important strategy for reducing food waste. Here's a recipe idea that will help you use what you have before buying more!

APPLE COOKIES

STEP ASIDE, CHOCOLATE CHIPS. THERE'S A NEW COOKIE IN TOWN



Ever heard of apple cookies? Well, all your friends are about to. Because in addition to being a great way to use up aging apples, James Beard's Apple Cookies are a sweet twist on a classic recipe that, once you try for yourself, you won't be able to stop sharing with your friends.

USES UP
Apples

MAKES
4 Dozen Cookies

INGREDIENTS

- 1/2 Cup Butter
- 1 1/3 Cup Packed Brown Sugar
- 1 Egg
- 2 1/2 Cups Sifted All-Purpose Flour
- 1 Tsp Cinnamon
- 1/2 Tsp Salt
- 1/2 Tsp Baking Soda
- 1/2 Tsp Nutmeg
- 1/2 Tsp Allspice
- 1/2 Tsp Cloves
- 1/3 Cup Apple Juice
- 1 Cup chopped, unpeeled, Apples
- 1 Cup chopped Walnuts, Hazelnuts, or Pecans
- 1 Cup Raisins

DIRECTIONS

Preheat oven to 375°F. In a large mixing bowl, cream the butter, then cream in the sugar. Beat in the egg.

In a separate mixing bowl, sift the dry ingredients together, then add to the creamed mixture, then add the juice and mix. Stir in the apple, nuts, and raisins.

Using two spoons (rather than your hands), scoop up a small amount of dough with one spoon and push it onto a buttered cookie sheet with the other spoon, leaving about one and a half inches between each cookie.

Bake for about 10 to 12 minutes, or until light brown. Transfer to a rack and let cool. Store in airtight containers.

CREDIT

James Beard, Author and Educator

Recipe courtesy of the James Beard Foundation.

FOOD STORAGE TIPS FROM SAVETHEFOOD.COM

FRUIT

APPLES

REFRIGERATE IT: Yes **AT FRESHEST:** Up to 6 weeks in the refrigerator, longer in a root cellar environment

OPTIMAL STORAGE: Do not wash until ready to use. Store in a breathable bag in the low-humidity drawer of the refrigerator. Handle carefully to prevent bruising, and separate any with bruises from other apples (or they will cause others to brown). Apples ripen 6 to 10 times faster at room temperature. For large quantities, store in a cool/humid bin covered with a damp towel in a root cellar or other cool place. Ideally, you'll want that apple individually in newspaper to reduce their influence on one another. Many heirloom varieties are not suited for long-term storage, so try to eat them right away.

FREEZING: Can be frozen ripe or cooked, with or without sugar. Raw—Wash, peel (if desired), core, and slice. To prevent browning, either blanch for 1 ½ to 2 minutes or sprinkle with lemon juice. Then choose between (1) packing dry with ½ cup/100 g sugar per 1 qt/1 kg of apples; (2) packing in 40 percent syrup (for pie-ready density on a baking sheet and freezing, then transferring to an airtight container. Cooked—Cook, cool, and pack in an airtight container.

USE IT UP/REVIVAL: To prevent apple slices from browning, toss them with one part citrus juice and three parts water. Meaty or wrinkled—Cook! Even unattractive apples can be cooked into applesauce, apple pies, apple crisps, etc. A few bruises are fine and can be cut out. If the whole fruit is soft or mushy, however, discard. Use apple peels to make a tea, flavor fresh water, make a jelly or syrup, or in smoothies.

AVOCADOS

REFRIGERATE IT: After ripe **AT FRESHEST:** Whole, after ripe, 2 to 5 days in refrigerator

OPTIMAL STORAGE: Store on the counter until ripe, then refrigerate loose. Place in a closed paper bag to accelerate ripening (adding an apple or banana will make them ripen even faster). Do not refrigerate before ripe, or they will never ripen. Store avocado-based products such as guacamole with plastic wrap pressed directly onto the surface of the food to avoid browning.

FREEZING: Peel, purée, mix in 1 Tbsp lemon juice per avocado, and pack into an airtight container, leaving ½ in/12 mm at the top for expansion.

USE IT UP/REVIVAL: If you find that an avocado is not ripe enough after you've cut it open, sprinkle the surface with lemon or lime juice, close it back up around the pit, wrap tightly, and place in the refrigerator. Check periodically to see if it has ripened enough to eat. To prevent browning once cut, close the avocado back up around the pit or sprinkle with lemon or lime juice and place in an airtight container in the refrigerator. If your avocado or guacamole has turned brown, skim off the brown oxidized parts. Parts that are green are still

BANANAS

REFRIGERATE IT: Optional after ripe **AT FRESHEST:** Less ripe, 5 to 7 days, ripe, 1 to 2 days

OPTIMAL STORAGE: Remove any plastic wrapping. Store on the counter at room temperature, away from other fruit (unless you're trying to ripen those fruit). Once ripe, you can store them in the refrigerator. The skin may darken, but the banana will be just right for several days.

FREEZING: Bananas can be frozen with or without the peel, but the peel can be difficult to remove when frozen. It's best to peel them and store in an airtight container. If leaving the peel on, place loose in the freezer and, when ready to use, cut off both ends and slide a knife under the peel to loosen.

USE IT UP/REVIVAL: Browning or spotted bananas are perfectly fine to eat. Bruised parts of bananas may be easily cut away or used. Very brown or nearly black bananas and frozen bananas are great for baking quick breads, muffins, or cakes.

Quick Tricks! Brought To You By: *Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources* NEBRASKA EXTENSION

QUICK TRICKS

Food toasted is money lost. One way to add new life to still edible foods is to repurpose leftovers and reuse them in new ways and new recipes. This booklet will get you started with simple tips and recipes. You'll find "recycled" can taste just as good, maybe even better than the original recipe.

Alice Henneman, MS, RDN Emeritus Educator

QUICK TRICKS

Grains

1. Use older bread to make croutons, bread crumbs, bread pudding, strata and French toast.

2. Use leftover rice in stir-fried rice, pudding and rice bowls.

3. Heat leftover pasta in a pan over medium heat with some olive oil. Sprinkle with Parmesan cheese. Add a little extra pizazz by topping the pasta with fresh herbs.

Fruit

1. Freeze lemon or lime juice in ice cube trays. Transfer to freezer bags. Pop into water for flavored water. NOTE: It's easier to remove frozen food from silicone ice cube trays and muffin pans than plastic trays or metal pans as silicon is more flexible.

2. Roll citrus fruits with your hand on a hard surface before juicing to get more juice from them.

3. Refrigerate ripe bananas to make them last a few days longer. They may be brown on outside, but still a good color on the inside.

4. Freeze lemon slices in water, in cupcake pans for large, flavored ice cubes.

5. Freeze washed, peeled, bite-size pieces of fruit for smoothies. Place on baking sheet with sides and cover with plastic wrap. Transfer frozen pieces to freezer bags. Toss into smoothies.



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ReFresh Nebraska is published by:
Keep Nebraska Beautiful
8101 O Street, Suite 114
Lincoln, NE 68510
Phone: (402) 486-4582
Email: info@knb.org
Web Site: www.knb.org

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SPAM malicious