

The trays behind each label are full. Rows and rows of donuts, perfectly arranged by flavor, look freshly baked. However, this begs the question, what happens to yesterday's unsold donuts? According to videos that surfaced in 2021, Dunkin Donuts requires employees to throw them away.¹ Why? Dunkin fears getting sued for possible sickness caused by barely day-old food, and likely is not incentivized to find food banks to accept their leftovers.

The problem reaches beyond massive fast-food chains, however: the state of Montana requires all milk to be sold just 12 days after it is pasteurized—one to two weeks before the industry standard for dairy freshness. According to Planet Money, this law has stayed in place in order to decrease competition from dairy farms outside of the state. While this milk can be donated, there is often not a location or food bank that has the capacity to hold milk.²

Food waste is a huge problem in American society, causing massive environmental damage when excess food is sent to landfill. At the same time, many soup kitchens and food banks have to rely on donations to provide their services. The problem will only worsen as food insecurity increases and more food is produced to keep up with increased demand.

With \$300, I would start a certification program to recognize local restaurants who give back to the community. A non-profit organization would run this program, and it would award certification from one to five stars based on three criteria: amount of food waste recorded, the ratio of the amount of fresh and healthy food forwarded to local soup kitchens to the amount of food disposed of, and use of services that directly combat food insecurity, such as Bento, a text-message service allowing those facing food insecurity to discreetly order from participating restaurants. In order to transport the food, the non-profit will hire and reimburse volunteers, and

¹ [Dunkin' Donuts Worker Shows Shocking Amount of Food They Throw Away Each Day | Newsweek](#)

² [The team at Planet Money dives into the milk industry of Montana : NPR](#)

food banks will distribute the food to those who have signed a waiver about the miniscule risk of donated food.

The food waste in restaurants will be recorded through a special disposal bin equipped with an Internet-enabled weight sensor, built using affordable Internet of Things hardware like the ESP32 microcontroller, that reports the data back to the non-profit. This also enables the restaurant to keep track of how much food waste they generate and empowers them to reduce it.

This certification will drive sales to these restaurants from sustainability-minded consumers, with a website and app featuring certified restaurants near the user's location and a prominent sign that the restaurant can hang in their window.

The program would start as a 1-month pilot, working with small local restaurants (with a focus on buffets and healthy food), soup kitchens or food banks, and shelters in order to conduct research on the efficacy of the program. Out of \$300, this would break down to around \$180 for equipping five restaurants with food waste tracking hardware, \$20 for website and cloud hosting, and \$100 for transportation of food.

I firmly believe this would create a virtuous cycle in the Northern Virginia community, decreasing food insecurity and forestalling more damage to the environment.