

Directions: Read the article. Highlight and comment as you come across claims that make you stop and pause to question the writer's point of view and accuracy. See my example in the first paragraph.

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## There's a Reason We Use Plastics to Package Food

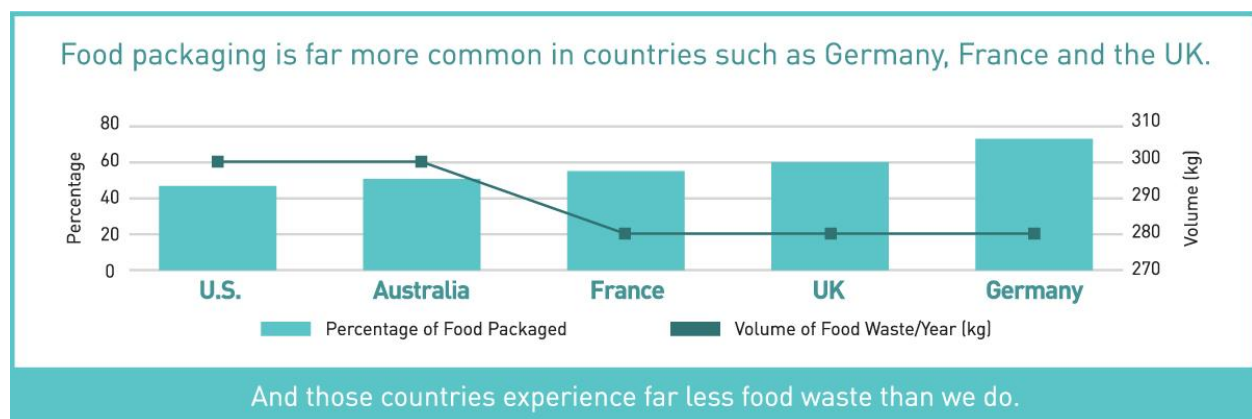
by [Steve Russell](#) | March 2, 2018

This week, a grocery store in Amsterdam made headlines for being the first to offer an aisle without plastic packaging. If the thinking behind this offering is “less plastic is better in the grocery store”—then we need to ask: In what way is this really a good thing? And we need to be clear about the problem(s) this move is designed to solve.

Are we trying to reduce food waste?

Every year in the United States, about 30 to 40 percent of the food we grow goes uneaten, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. The longer a food item stays fresh, the greater its chance of being eaten. Studies have shown that cucumbers wrapped in plastic last eleven days longer than unwrapped cucumbers <sup>1</sup>; bananas wrapped in plastic last 21 days longer than their unwrapped counterparts <sup>2</sup>; and beef wrapped in plastic vacuum packaging with an oxygen barrier film lasts 26 days longer <sup>3</sup>.

Countries that package a greater share of food items tend to generate far less food waste than we do <sup>4</sup>.



Do we also want to reduce the environmental impacts that come with food waste?

Growing food requires investments of water, land, energy, and fuel. Now consider that we throw away 30 to 40 percent of everything we grow. That means we're not just wasting food, we're wasting 30 to 40 percent of all the resources we used to grow that food. Think of a little food packaging as a small investment that helps to protect all of the resources that went into producing that item.

The director of the Industry Council for Research on Packaging and the Environment has said, "A telling fact is that ten times more resources—materials, energy and water—are used to make and distribute food than are used to make the packaging to protect it." So when we waste a food item, we're wasting 10 times the resources that were used to make its protective packaging.

Plus food is the single most prevalent material in our landfills. When food decomposes, it produces methane, a greenhouse gas 21 times more potent than CO<sub>2</sub>. Landfills generate 20 percent of all methane emissions, so using plastic packaging to prevent food waste can really help cut our carbon emissions.

Thinking beyond food waste, what about reducing our overall environmental footprint?

It's true that we can make packaging out of materials other than plastics, namely paper, glass, aluminum and steel. But studies have shown that plastics are often more efficient. Being both strong and lightweight means plastics can ship more product with less packaging material than alternatives. And using less material in the first place results in significant reductions in energy use, greenhouse gas emissions, and waste.

A [2016 study by Trucost](#) (Plastics and Sustainability <sup>5</sup>) found that replacing plastic with alternatives in packaging and consumer products could raise environmental costs at least fourfold. Another [study](#) <sup>6</sup> showed that replacing plastics with alternatives in packaging would increase the amount of packaging generated in the United States by 55 million tons annually, and would increase energy use and our carbon footprint by 82 percent and 130 percent, respectively. Not much of an improvement, right?

Don't we need to keep plastics out of our oceans?

YES. Full stop. Used plastics shouldn't find their way into our rivers and oceans. Yet it's highly unlikely that the packaging on items purchased in a grocery store,

then transported home—where we have access to curbside waste collection (and usually also recycling)—will become marine litter. It just doesn't add up.



The supermarket chain says it's using biofilms as an alternative to plastics, and claims they're compostable. But "compostable" products on the market today don't readily breakdown in our oceans, and recyclers don't want them for obvious reasons. In the United States and other Western countries, we're fortunate to have strong systems for collecting and managing materials after use. We need to work on [getting more plastics into our recycling systems](#) and making sure our used plastics are directed toward their next productive use. For consumers, that means placing used bottles, containers, caps and lids in our curbside bins and bringing our used [polyethylene bags and wraps to grocery stores](#). We can also shop for new products made with recycled plastics. And of course, we can choose to bring a reusable bag or bottle with us on the go. These, too, are often made from plastics.

The benefits of plastic packaging might not be making headlines these days, but they are making a positive difference in preserving our food and reducing our environmental footprint.

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<sup>1</sup> Incpen. "[Packaging in Perspective](#)," 2008.

<sup>2</sup> C&EN. "[The Cost of Plastic Packaging](#)," October 2016. Volume 94, Issue 41, pages 32-37.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

[4](#) Quantifying the Value of Food Packaging as a Strategy to Prevent Food Waste in America, AMERIPEN, Jan. 2018.

[5](#) Trucost. [Plastics and Sustainability: A Valuation of Environmental Costs, Benefits and Continuous Improvement](#), 2016.

[6](#) Franklin Associates. [Impact of Plastic Packaging on Life Cycle Energy Consumption and Greenhouse Gas Emissions in the United States and Canada](#), 2014.