

Swiss population in favor of strict food waste rules

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ETH researchers have shown that the Swiss population is willing to pay more to reduce food waste. It is in favor of government regulations that set strict reduction targets and ensure transparent monitoring of

implementation.

For every person in Switzerland, 300 kilograms of perfectly good food is thrown away every year. About one-third of all food worldwide suffers this fate—and the figures are rising. Moreover, [food waste](#) is responsible for at least 8% of global greenhouse gas emissions.

As part of a United Nations commitment, Switzerland has undertaken to halve its per-capita food waste by 2030. Without ambitious government regulations, it will be practically impossible to reach this target. But how do Swiss citizens feel about stricter regulations to combat food waste? How should the rules be designed and justified so as to earn [majority support](#)? And would people be willing to pay more for their food as a trade-off for reducing food waste?

These are the questions investigated in a new study by ETH researchers Lukas Fesenfeld, Lukas Rudolph and Thomas Bernauer, which was recently published in the journal *Nature Food*. Interest in this topic extends beyond academia, as shown by the Fair Food Initiative, which was rejected by 62% of Swiss voters in 2018. An important factor in the defeat was that many voters feared higher food prices.

Preference for strict and transparent rules

The ETH researchers' study concludes that decisionmakers can secure the support of the population by coming up with a suitable design and a compelling justification for the regulations against food waste.

"A majority of Swiss citizens is willing to accept higher food costs as the price of stricter food waste regulations, provided those regulations set ambitious reduction targets and are monitored transparently," explains ETH Professor Bernauer from the International Political Economy and Environmental Politics group. This result is surprising, given that citizens

are much more sensitive to price increases in other areas.

Ingrained dislike of food waste

"An important driver of this willingness seems to be people's ingrained dislike of wasting food. The principle that you shouldn't throw away food seems to be deeply embedded in our collective consciousness," says Lukas Fesenfeld, who researches at the University of Bern as well as at ETH Zurich.

Reminding citizens of this principle makes them more willing to agree to ambitious reduction targets. It makes no difference here whether the principle is expressed as a national or an international [target](#). This insight can also be leveraged for other topics: "Campaigns are more likely to be effective if they activate deeply embedded normative principles in people," Fesenfeld says.

State or industry regulation?

But who should enact and implement regulations for the reduction of food waste? The government, with binding rules, or the food industry itself, with voluntary initiatives? On this point, the ETH researchers' study indicates that citizens see the state as having a key role to play.

"If voluntary initiatives are perceived as unambitious, the Swiss population sees it as the state's responsibility to pass strict regulations with strong oversight for companies," says Lukas Rudolph, a researcher at both LMU Munich and ETH Zurich.

Representative survey

To ascertain what the Swiss population makes of stricter food waste

rules, the scientists collaborated with the Federal Office for the Environment to carry out [representative survey](#) experiments on 3,329 Swiss citizens.

The study was conducted as part of the Swiss Environment Panel. Its goal was to simulate real decisions as accurately as possible. That the results of survey experiments in Switzerland correspond with actual voting decisions is something that has been scientifically proven.

Simulating real decisions through experiments

The survey put a range of possible regulation scenarios to participants: rules laid down by government versus rules voluntarily implemented by private industry; ambitious versus weak reduction targets; strict control mechanisms versus voluntary reporting; 10% higher prices versus no price increase. Subsequently, participants were asked about their attitude to food waste regulations. This enabled the authors to measure how different rules affect the attitude of the population.

The researchers carried out a similar experiment on the justification for food waste rules. Some participants were presented with national targets for reducing food waste; others were presented with international targets; and others still were presented with no targets. One group was shown the statement that all countries in the world had set themselves the goal, under the aegis of the United Nations, to cut food waste by half by 2030. A second group was shown a national measure to the effect that a majority of the Swiss parliament had signed up to this goal with support from across the entire political spectrum. Through this so-called framing experiment, the researchers investigated whether participants' attitudes to stricter food waste rules change when presented as national or international targets.

Finally, the researchers also studied how variously structured private

sector initiatives for reducing food waste affect the support of citizens for strong government [regulation](#) of [food waste](#).

More information: Lukas Fesenfeld et al, Policy framing, design and feedback can increase public support for costly food waste regulation, *Nature Food* (2022). [DOI: 10.1038/s43016-022-00460-8](https://doi.org/10.1038/s43016-022-00460-8)

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