

Senate Committee Approves Food Waste Reduction Bill Package

TRENTON- A five-bill package to address food waste reduction in New Jersey was approved today by the Senate Environment and Energy Committee. The bills would set a goal to halve food waste in the coming years, bring awareness to food date labeling and encourage food donation, among other actions. Americans waste a shocking amount of food every year with as much as 40 percent of the food in the U.S. going uneaten. This accounts for 160 billion pounds of food wasted each year. According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture these statistics are made even worse when you consider that 42.2 million Americans live in food insecure households. Apart from the human cost, reducing food waste is beneficial for the environment; reducing water, fertilizer, and oil use, and greenhouse gas emissions that contribute to climate change. Food waste in the United States produces the annual equivalent greenhouse gas emissions of 33 million passenger vehicles.

“Our goal of creating a sustainable future for our residents must be closely focused on reducing hunger in New Jersey and working to curb climate change by moving towards a responsible production and consumption model,” said Senator Bob Smith (D-Middlesex, Somerset), Chair of the Committee. “Wasting food does not make economic or environmental sense. In the United States, millions of tons of food that are still fit for consumption are wasted and dumped. It is incumbent upon us to take action.”

The first bill, S-3027, sponsored by Senator Smith and Senator Linda Greenstein (D-Mercer, Middlesex) aims to reduce by 2030 the amount of food waste generated in the state by 50 percent. The bill requires the Department of Environmental Protection in consultation with the Department of Agriculture to develop and commence implementation of a plan to accomplish this goal within a year.

“This is an intelligent alternative to improve our environment,” said Senator Greenstein. “We have a problem with waste in this country, and recycling solid waste is a viable system that will produce energy to provide to our homes, schools and businesses. It will also decrease our dependency on fossil fuels.”

A second bill, S-3028, sponsored by Senators Smith and Greenstein, would standardize food date labels and require the Department of Health to create a public education program on food date labeling and establish guidelines related to food safety. Under the bill, a manufacturer could use: 1) a “quality date” label to indicate the date after which the quality of a food product may begin to deteriorate, but is still acceptable for consumption; or 2) an “elevated-risk date” to indicate the date, established by manufacturer, after which there is a high level of risk associated with the consumption of a food product. “Huge volumes of food are wasted each day, while many people in the United States and in New Jersey go to sleep hungry,” said Senator Smith. “As a State, we need to reduce food waste. Together, we can reverse this unacceptable trend and have a healthier New Jersey and create a sustainable future for our residents.”

According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), in 2012, the United States threw away more than 36 million tons of food; from that, less than 5 percent was recycled. Much of it ended up rotting in landfills, releasing methane into the atmosphere. Methane is a potent greenhouse gas which contributes to climate change. The EPA estimates that if 50 percent of the food waste generated each year in the U.S. were anaerobically digested, enough electricity would be generated to power 2.5 million homes for a year.

A third bill, S-3012, sponsored by Senator Raymond Lesniak (D-Union) would allow taxpayers to deduct charitable food donations from business inventory for their gross income taxes. The contribution must be made to an organization that is determined by the Internal Revenue Service to be an organization eligible to receive tax-deductible charitable contributions.

“This will allow tax deductions for organizations and philanthropists who donate food, which will help reduce food waste and encourage more food donations for soup kitchens and food banks that help the most vulnerable in the state,” said Senator Lesniak.

A fourth bill, released from the committee as Senate Committee Substitute for S-2360/S-3030, sponsored by Senators Diane B. Allen and Linda Greenstein, would require the Department of Agriculture to develop voluntary guidelines to encourage school districts and institutions of higher education to donate excess food. The bill would also extend “Food Bank Good Samaritan Act” protections to school districts.

“The education of our youth is vital so they can learn from our mistakes and become better stewards of our food supply and our environment. We need food conservation and taking care of our environment to be our children’s natural instinct, not an afterthought,” said Senator Greenstein.

The fifth bill, S-3026, sponsored by Senator Smith clarifies and expands liability protection for food donors and gleaners to donations made to any person. The bill would also provide protections for donations of food which has passed its “best by” or similar date but still appears to be fit for human consumption and expand the protections regardless of any laws regulating the quality of food labeling. Under the bill, nonprofit organizations that collect or glean agricultural food for the purposes of feeding needy people would not be held liable for damages in any civil action due to the presence or activity of the organization or volunteers and unless the damage is a direct result of a gross negligence, recklessness or knowing misconduct of the nonprofit organization or volunteer.

The bills all cleared the Committee and next head to the full Senate for further consideration.