

Why GAO Did This Study

USDA has reported that almost one-third of the U.S. food supply is lost or wasted at the retail and consumer levels. Studies indicate that some of this waste may occur because of consumer confusion about the meaning of date labels displayed on packaged food. Such labels are not federally regulated, and food manufacturers use different phrases on date labels. USDA and FDA have roles in ensuring the U.S. food supply is safe and properly labeled, but neither agency been directed—or given express authority—to regulate date labels.

GAO was asked to examine consumer confusion about date labels. This report (1) describes the steps USDA and FDA have taken to address consumer confusion about date labels and (2) examines the extent to which USDA and FDA have coordinated with each other and with nonfederal stakeholders on date labels. GAO reviewed studies on date labels and FDA and USDA documents; interviewed agency officials and representatives of nonfederal stakeholders, such as industry, advocacy organizations, and state governments; and compared the agencies' efforts to leading practices identified by GAO.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is recommending that USDA and FDA develop a mechanism to facilitate coordination with relevant nonfederal stakeholders on actions related to date labels. USDA and FDA agreed with our recommendation and are planning actions to implement the recommendation.

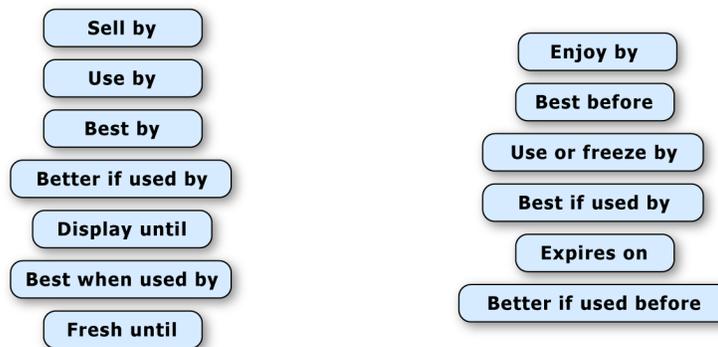
DATE LABELS ON PACKAGED FOODS

USDA and FDA Could Take Additional Steps to Reduce Consumer Confusion

What GAO Found

The U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and Food and Drug Administration (FDA) have taken steps to address consumer confusion about date labels on packaged foods. For example, to reduce confusion about introductory phrases on date labels, such as whether the dates indicate food is safe to eat (see figure), and resulting food waste, USDA in December 2016 issued a fact sheet on date labels for consumers. In addition, USDA has funded research on issues related to date labels (e.g., how labels affected participants' willingness to waste food) and developed a smartphone application that provides consumers with information on the shelf life of products. FDA has issued educational materials to consumers about the meaning of phrases on date labels and in May 2019 issued a statement that it supports industry efforts to standardize date labels.

Examples of Introductory Phrases for Date Labels Currently Used by Industry



Source: GAO analysis of information from the Food Marketing Institute and the Grocery Manufacturers Association. | GAO-19-407

USDA and FDA have coordinated on some initiatives focused on date labels on packaged foods. For example, agency officials said they were working together to develop information for food banks, food donors, and recipients of donated food on how to interpret date labels so food past the date on the label—but otherwise wholesome—is not wasted. In October 2018, the agencies, with the Environmental Protection Agency, signed a formal agreement to educate consumers about food loss and waste. In addition, USDA and FDA have taken steps to work with some nonfederal stakeholders—such as nonprofit organizations and an international organization—on date labeling. However, USDA and FDA officials told GAO that they do not have a specific mechanism to coordinate with state, local, and tribal officials on creating a common approach to date labels. State, local, and tribal governments may choose to regulate date labels, and the majority of states have date label requirements for certain foods. According to prior GAO work, ensuring that relevant participants are included in interagency collaborative efforts is a leading practice for interagency collaboration. By developing a mechanism to facilitate coordination with nonfederal stakeholders, such as state, local, and tribal officials, on actions related to date labels, USDA and FDA could better assure that approaches they take to address consumer understanding of date labels are effective in helping reduce consumer confusion.