

Changes planned to the sell-by dates on food

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By Caitlin Dewey | The Washington Post

The majority of Americans have no clear idea what “sell by” labels are trying to tell them. But the grocery industry has made moves to clear up the confusion.

The Food Marketing Institute and the Grocery Manufacturers Association, the two largest trade groups for the grocery industry, have adopted standardized regulations to clear up what product date labels mean.

Where manufacturers now use any of 10 separate label phrases, ranging from “expires on” to “better if used by,” they’ll now be encouraged to use only two: “Use By” and “Best if Used By.”

The former is a safety designation, meant to indicate when perishable foods are no longer good. “Best if Used By” is a quality descriptor — a subjective guess of when the manufacturer thinks the product should be consumed for peak flavor.

That’s what most “use-by” dates indicate now, though many consumers believe they signal whether a product is okay to eat. In fact, it’s totally fine to eat a product even well after its so-called expiration date.

These dates typically indicate one of two things: a message from the manufacturer to the grocery store, telling the store when the product will look best on shelves, or a subjective measure of when consumers will most “enjoy” the product. But when consumers see a date labeled “use by” they often tend to assume that it’s a food-safety claim, regulated by some objective standard.

In addition to costing average Americans, in the form of prematurely tossed groceries, the waste represents a significant use of landfill space and source of greenhouse gas emissions.

Americans throw \$218 billion worth of food away each year. 398,000 tons, or \$1.8 billion, could be saved through standardized date labels.

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