



# *Down to Brass Tacks*

QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER OF THE BRASS TACKS INITIATIVE



*A jar of peanut butter labeled "Best if used by April 19, 2027." The label indicates the food may lose quality after the printed date, but will still be safe to consume.*

## *Clearing Confusion: Understanding Food Date Labels*

Food date labels such as "Best By," "Sell By," and "Use By" are found on packaging across grocery stores. However, the meaning of these labels often confuses consumers, leading to significant amounts of food being discarded prematurely. The challenge of interpreting these labels contributes to food waste on both household and industry levels, with impacts on costs and environmental sustainability.

### **The Impact of Label Confusion on Food Waste**

The USDA reports that food waste in U.S. households amounts to approximately 30-40% of the food supply. Some studies estimate that up to 20% of this food is discarded due to misunderstanding date labels, much of which is still safe to eat but is thrown away because consumers mistake date labels as indicators of food safety rather than quality. Rachel Houck, executive director of the Brass Tacks Initiative, attests to the same confusion in her household: "Before I started researching facts about food loss and waste, I thought all the date labels meant the same thing," said Houck. "I tossed out everything past the printed date because I thought it was all unsafe to eat."

Part of the confusion lies in the various labels used across the food industry. For example, a "Best By" or "Best If Used By" date typically refers to the manufacturer's estimate of when a product will be at its peak quality—not an expiration date. On the other hand, a "Use By" date might indicate the last recommended date for safety on certain highly perishable items (e.g., some deli meats). The term "Sell By" is solely for retailers. It refers to when a retailer should sell items for peak quality and is not an indicator of safety. The product will remain perfectly safe to eat well after the "Sell By" date. Without standardized definitions and clear consumer education, shoppers err on the side of caution, discarding food that is wholesome and safe.

*(continued on page 3)*

## *In This Issue*

### **UNDERSTANDING FOOD DATE LABELS**

.....

### **BTI UPDATES**

.....

### **VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES**

.....

#### **Contact us:**

info@thebrasstacks.org  
P.O. Box 192  
New Prague, MN 56071  
www.thebrasstacks.org

## Czech Out New Prague

BTI once again participated in the Czech Out New Prague event, held on Thursday, August 7, by the New Prague Chamber of Commerce. This free event brings together businesses and residents of New Prague every year.

Our staff and volunteers engaged visitors in discussions about food waste and encouraged them to adopt waste-reduction practices in their homes. After participating in *Food Waste Trivia*, visitors had the chance to spin the prize wheel—there are no losers here!

We also collaborated with the City of New Prague to provide registration and packet pickup for the New Prague Household Organics Drop-off site.

We look forward to seeing everyone again next year!



BTI President Todd Fischer and a junior volunteer staff the BTI booth at Czech Out New Prague. Visitors learned important information about food waste, won prizes, and registered for the New Prague Household Organics Drop-off site.



## JOIN US!

The Brass Tacks Initiative is seeking volunteers for the following committees to help us continue our mission to support sustainable practices in the food stream through research, education, and collaboration.

### Marketing

Establishing, maintaining, and growing the visibility of the BTI. Helps promote our programs, products, and services.

### Development

Helps BTI achieve its mission by developing new resources and funding opportunities for the organization.

### Outreach/Education

Plans and implements educational events that inform and engage communities on sustainability in the food system.

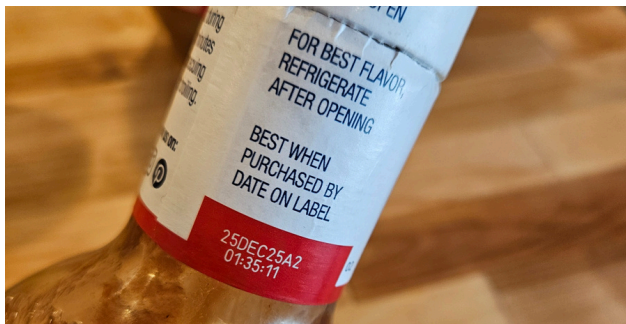
For more information visit our website [www.thebrasstacks.org/volunteer](http://www.thebrasstacks.org/volunteer) or email [Rachel@thebrasstacks.org](mailto:Rachel@thebrasstacks.org)

## Food Date Labels

*Continued from page 1.*

### Efforts to Bring Clarity and Reduce Waste

Recognizing the role of date label confusion in food loss and waste, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) put out a joint Request for Information (RFI) at the beginning of this year. Through the RFI, they gathered data on current industry practices and consumer perceptions related to date labeling to inform potential policy updates and consumer education. The aim is to establish a more consistent message across products, reducing consumer confusion and preventing food waste in the home. This initiative is part of a broader strategy to reduce U.S. food loss and waste by 50 % by 2030.



Food product with a “Best When Purchased By” date label. This indicates that the product is still safe to consume after the printed date, but may lose flavor or quality.

## Common Date Labels

### “Best Before” or “Best By”

Food quality may decline after this date but it is still safe to eat.

### “Sell By” or “Purchase By”

Retailers should sell items before this date for peak quality.

### “Use By” or “Expires”

Safety is compromised after this date passes

### Why This Matters for the Food Industry

Food waste has considerable environmental and economic ramifications. Wasted food means wasted resources—water, energy, and labor—that went into production, transportation, and storage. Moreover, it contributes to landfill mass and greenhouse gas emissions. Addressing the root causes of waste, including labeling confusion, is a critical step toward sustainability goals and cost savings across the supply chain.

We encourage food industry stakeholders, policymakers, and consumers to engage with ongoing efforts to standardize food date labels. Your participation helps build a transparent, efficient food system that benefits all.

#### References:

- USDA Economic Research Service – Food Waste FAQs
- FDA & USDA Joint Request for Information on Food Date Labeling
- National Strategy for Reducing Food Loss and Waste

## Make a Contribution!

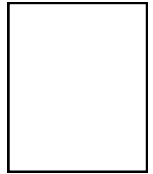


Your contribution of any size helps us provide free and low-cost programs to families, small businesses, and other organizations.

Scan the code or visit [www.thebrasstacks.org](http://www.thebrasstacks.org) to make a donation today!







---

## ***About BTI***

The Brass Tacks Initiative is a 501c3 nonprofit founded on a mission to support sustainability in the food stream through research, education, and collaboration.

Our name comes from the phrase "let's get down to brass tacks." The phrase means to address the most important facts of a project or problem. The fact is food waste is a problem with environmental, economic, and social impacts. We believe the only way to make an impact on food waste is to **research** best practices and new methods of recycling, **collaborate** with the companies who are generating waste to find alternatives to the landfill, and make sure that current and future leaders are equipped with the **education** needed to make sustainable impacts in their community.

*For more information about BTI visit our website [www.thebrasstacks.org](http://www.thebrasstacks.org) or contact us via email at [info@thebrasstacks.org](mailto:info@thebrasstacks.org).*