

Deciphering Food Date Labels

Manufacturers apply a wide variety of date labels such as “expires on,” “best before,” and “sell by,” to indicate the last date that a food will maintain its peak quality and flavor. However, with the exception of certain products like infant formula, these date labels are simply used to indicate peak freshness.

Date labeling is currently voluntary, and vague phrasing that varies by state leads to confusion at the grocery store and at home. Most consumers don’t realize that date labels generally refer to a product’s estimated quality, not whether it’s safe to consume. This confusion leads to an estimated 20 percent of consumer wasted food. That also means that perfectly edible food that could feed people gets sent to the landfill instead.

Policies Under Consideration







More accurate, consistent labeling would help consumers understand when these date labels serve as guidelines, and when to pay attention to firm expiration dates.

Reintroduced in 2023, the [Federal Food Date Labeling Act](#) seeks to limit the number of different phrases on products and provide consumers with information that differentiates safety versus quality issues. Another provision of the Food Date Labeling Act would expressly allow for donation of food past its quality date.

Similar to the Federal Act, [California Assembly Bill \(AB 660\)](#), introduced in 2023, would also require packaged food sold in California be labeled with clear and consistent expiration dates. The bill would prohibit the use of consumer visible “sell by” dates, which should only be used by the store to indicate how long to display the product for sale based on when the manufacturer believes food will be freshest, not when it will spoil.

No matter what the date label says, the best indicator of freshness is by using your eyes and nose. For the most part, you can trust your senses to know when food has gone bad.

Want more food-saving tips? Visit www.StopFoodWaste.org.

EXISTING LABELS	PROPOSED LABELS
	
<p>Labels referring to a product’s estimated quality, not food safety, would need to use consistent language to help reduce confusion.</p>	
	
<p>This label is related to food safety. Food should not be consumed after this date, although this label would be reserved for highly perishable foods.</p>	
	
<p>The label is meant for a store’s internal inventory only and would be prohibited on consumer packaging. Often, at least a third of the product’s shelf-life remains after this date.</p>	