

U.S. Public Perceptions of Food Date Labeling: A content analysis of Request for Information (RFI) response comments

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Introduction

In the U.S., more than 50 types of date labels (i.e., Best If Used By, Best By, Used By, Sell By) are used on food products, yet remain unregulated (Sapci & Sapci, 2020). This inconsistency leads to public misinterpretation of date labels, often resulting in unnecessary food disposal due to safety concerns (Qi & Roe, 2016; Gong et al., 2022; Patra et al., 2022). For instance, 84% of consumers discard food at least occasionally when it is near or past the date on its packaging, contributing to over six million tons of food waste in 2023 (Neff et al., 2019; ReFED, 2023), nevertheless quite a few labels refer to peak quality, not safety (Food Safety and Inspection Service, 2023). The financial burden of food waste is also substantial, costing farmers, manufacturers, households, and businesses over \$449 billion annually (ReFED, 2025). Meanwhile, nearly one in seven U.S. households experience food insecurity (Rabbitt et al., 2024). Additionally, research shows that although most consumers check date labels, many misinterpret their meaning. For instance, only 57.4% of consumers correctly understood “Best If Used By” (Kavanaugh et al., 2020), and only 44.8% accurately interpreted “Use By” (Turvey et al., 2021). Besides people habitually focus more on the date compared to the phrase when making discard decisions (Badiger, 2022), which weakens the information role of label phrases and causes more unnecessary food disposal. Although previous studies have investigated the influence of consumers’ understanding of date labels on discarding behavior and effective intervention strategies, there is still a knowledge gap in the collection of public self-expressed confusion and suggestions about the food labels, which can inform future policies, guidance, or education efforts aimed at improving clarity in food labeling and reducing food waste.

Theoretical Framework

The analytical approach of framing provides a framework to explore how actors (i.e. organizations, media, and individuals) interpret, understand, and shape a particular issue (Lahtinen & Närvänen, 2020). Given the stakeholder role of consumers in the food date labeling practice, the present study applies the framing theory (Scheufele, 1999) to uncover the public’s cognitive frame of food date labeling practice, identifying how individuals construct the role of food date label, the dominant frames, and interpretive patterns. This framework guidance provides a lens to categorize the recurring themes in public discourse. The purpose of this study is to analyze public perceptions on date labeling practices by examining public comments in response to the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA)’s Request for Information (RFI), aiming to identify key concerns, misconceptions, and recommendations related to date labeling among the public. To fulfill this purpose, we propose the following question:

RQ: What are the main themes when public frame the date-label practice in the public comments?

Methodology

In December 2024, USDA, in collaboration with the Food Safety and Inspection Service (FSIS) and the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), issued a request for public comments on food date labeling practices. The USDA sought input on industry practices, public perceptions, and the impact of date labels on food waste. This study collected and analyzed public comments submitted via the Federal eRulemaking Portal (Regulations.gov). The dataset consisted of 391

publicly available comments submitted between December 5, 2024, and January 11, 2025. Each entry included the commenter's name (if provided), country, organization affiliation (if applicable), and content of comments. Only online comments were analyzed, excluding attachments or mailed submissions. A team of three researchers independently reviewed and categorized themes to ensure coding reliability. Additionally, to ensure a comprehensive understanding of the comments that might exhibit thematic overlap, it was permitted that some comments be coded into multiple themes.

Results

Three key themes that emerged are *consumer confusion about date labels, suggestions and standardization of date labels, and public education and outreach*. First, consumers ($N = 235$) expressed confusion over the meanings of different date labels, often associating them with food safety rather than quality. Many consumers expressed concern about consuming foods beyond the printed date, with some relying on sensory evaluation to determine food safety. In addition, many commenters emphasized that unclear labels lead to unnecessary food disposal. Second, many comments ($N = 281$) suggested alternative labels such as “Consume By”, “Unsafe to eat after”, and “Discard After” to enhance clarity. Commenters also called for standardization, emphasizing the need for uniform terminology, clearer label placement, and larger, easy-to-read fonts. Third, many comments ($N = 70$) highlighted the need for national education campaigns to clarify the meaning of date labels. Suggested strategies included promoting USDA tools, public awareness campaigns, and collaboration with organizations, such as food banks to ensure food beyond certain dates is safely redistributed.

Conclusions/Implications/Recommendations

This study demonstrated significant public confusion surrounding date labeling in the public's perception frame, highlighting the need for standardized terminology and improved consumer education. The public comments revealed extensive misunderstandings about date labels, particularly in distinguishing between food quality and safety labels (Neff et al, 2019). These inconsistent labeling practices create further ambiguity and call for uniform standards across all food products. Therefore, this study emphasizes the importance of multi-stakeholder collaboration in addressing labeling inconsistencies (Patra et al., 2022). Specifically, policymakers should consider adopting standardized date labeling practices, as implemented in some European countries. Industry stakeholders, including food manufacturers and retailers, should improve date labels to make them more comprehensible. Furthermore, public education initiatives should be expanded through national campaigns to increase consumer awareness of the meanings of various date labels (Eičaitė et al., 2021). To effectively address food labeling challenges, future research should explore consumer response to standardized labels and assess the potential impact of emerging technologies such as smart packaging. By implementing these strategies, food labeling policies can be improved to reduce food waste, enhance food security, and support public economic well-being.

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