

by Paul van der Werf

*"A multi-disciplinary approach is required to develop a holistic framework for food."*



# The Thin Green Line

"Food as food" versus "food as waste"

*"... I eat, like, maybe once a day. I know we can't afford to get groceries every week."*

— A 26-year-old mother in London, Ontario

On February 28 I attended an Ontario event presented by the London Community Foundation ([lct.on.ca](http://lct.on.ca)) to determine the feasibility of setting up a local Food Planning Council to implement London's Food Charter, which envisions that city as a "food secure community."

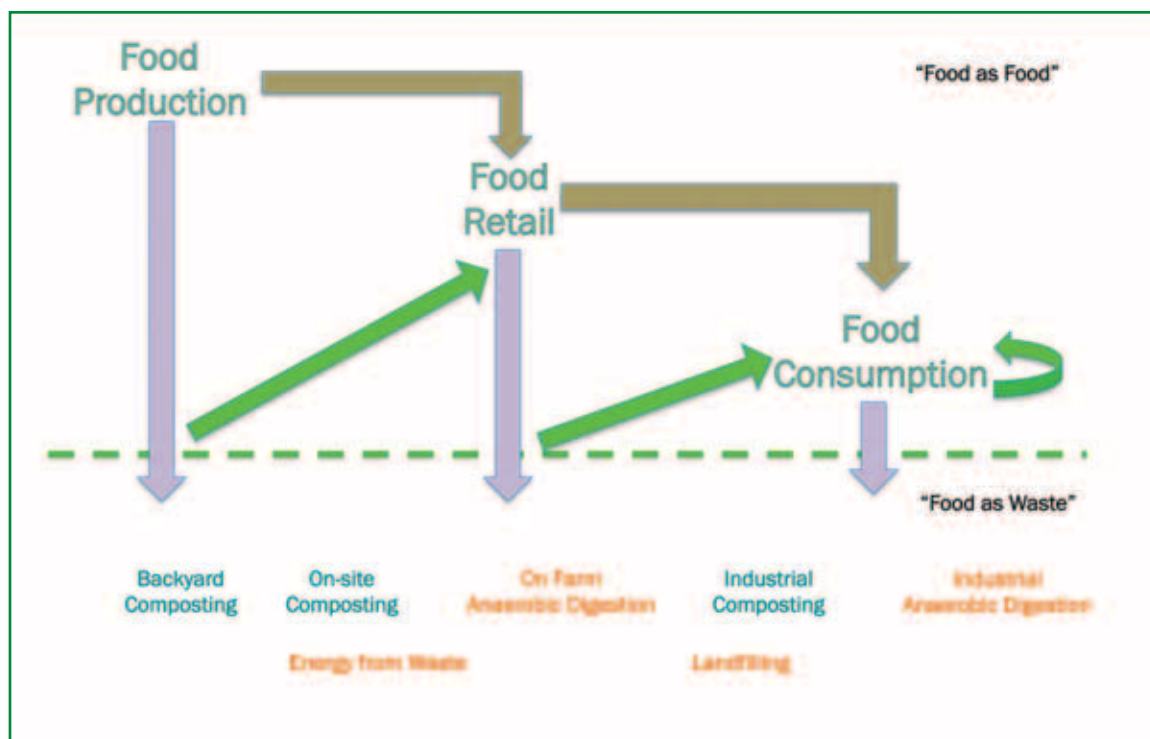
Our society has strange inconsistencies: We have an obesity epidemic while demand at food banks grows.

At the "Food Waste Management Solutions Workshop: Getting the Most out of Unavoidable Food Waste" hosted by the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture and Food, on March 6, the Provision Coalition ([provi-](http://provisioncoalition.com)

[sioncoalition.com](http://provisioncoalition.com)) presented data that shows, for instance, that every year up to 40 per cent of food (estimated at \$27 billion) is wasted from all sources in Canada.

This translates into about \$2 per Canadian per day. We need to change how we produce, sell and consume food to reduce this waste, and the waste management industry can play a role. We need a "green line" to demarcate "food as food" versus "food as waste." (See diagram.)

The waste management industry benefits from food crossing the green line, which conflicts with the need societally to use as much as possible to feed people.



The diagram shows, in general terms, the path of food from production to sale and consumption and the opportunities for food to cross the green line and become a waste, which must then be managed as such. It also highlights the three key opportunities (green arrows), which are exercises in economic and social prudence, to avoid this green line. The economic and social benefit of food decreases while environmental impact increases from the top to the bottom of the diagram.

### Beyond the green line

On the waste side of the green line are the various familiar processes via which food waste is normally managed. Some of these can capture energy and return organic matter and nutrients back to the soil. Life-cycle assessment can determine, case by case, the benefits of each process to help waste generators determine the best management method.

Keeping food on the “edible” side of the green line really represents waste reduction. This is where the conflict lies. Consumer culture tells us we can always buy more things, including food. We overlook the durability (i.e., shelf life) of food, often throwing items out that are just fine. We forget that “best before” dates don’t mean “worst after.” We obsess about liability.

Should it be left to food producers, retailers and consumers to work all this out? Some think so. Yet the waste management industry is right at the green line between “food as food” and “food as waste” and could help reduce what ends up in landfill.

### Solutions

Two key areas need to be addressed. The first is to properly quantify just how much food waste is generated along each part of the supply chain. The second is to identify what is now considered “food waste” along the lines of what is edible versus that which has passed that point.


As I listened to the Provision Coalition’s presentation it occurred to me that the authors are using largely “top-down” data (i.e., created largely from interviews and desktop research) to make their estimates. There are obvious gaps in the data.

Conversely, the waste management industry has been developing its own “bottom up” estimates. As I discovered while completing the *2014 Ontario Organic Waste Report* there continue to be considerable data gaps, particularly for IC&I waste. The gaps can be closed by taking primary waste composition data (from waste audits) and rationalizing it through the modeling of this data.

Much of this data is available, although in disparate places. The model that needs to be created to rationalize this data is pretty straight forward. Ultimately this “bottom-up” data needs to be conjoined with the “top down” data to complete the estimate.

While refining the estimate of food waste generation we must ask (and quantify): What part of food that currently crosses the green line can be pulled back and used for its intended purpose? This can be used to ultimately direct more edible food to those who need it and also improve our grasp of true market opportunities for waste diversion.

The London Community Foundation event revealed that a multi-disciplinary approach is required to develop a holistic framework for the production, sale and consumption of food to prevent it crossing the “green line.” This includes such diverse sectors as agriculture, transportation, retailers, consumers and the waste management industry.

Food’s greatest economic, environmental and social benefit is achieved when it enters someone’s mouth. We have a responsibility to help direct more of it there. 

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