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Southern Exposure opens with prime directive on food waste, nutrition insecurity

By

Kyle Eberth, Northwest editor

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The [Southeast Produce Council](#) kicked off a morning of educational sessions with “The Prime Directive: Food Waste & Nutrition Insecurity.” Hosting the conversation was moderator Pete Pearson, global initiative lead of food circulatory at the World Wildlife Fund, who set an important tone for the morning reminding the audience that an estimated 30-40 percent of food goes to waste and represents the largest category of material placed in landfills.

U.S. data back that number via the FDA and the USDA’s Economic Research Service, which noted that in 2010, 31 percent of food loss was lost at the retail and consumer level, corresponding to approximately 133 billion pounds and \$161 billion worth of food. Mitigating that food is lost is the looming question.

Abby Prior, chief commercial officer at BrightFarms, a leading indoor grower of leafy greens based out of Irvington, NY, kicked off the panel discussion emphasizing the benefits of greenhouse growing — namely efficiency and controlled environmental growing conditions. She said, “what we are trying to do is shorten the supply chain process.”

She went on to share that BrightFarm’s rapid development of controlled environment acreage across the East Coast will equate to a quicker turn from farm to fork. Prior said, “We can turn a crop around in roughly three weeks, and be on shelves in less than 48hrs, that efficiency means consumers now have so much more time at home with their fresh produce.”

Representing a retail perspective was Justin LaCroix, director of sustainable operations and brand lead, health and sustainability for Ahold Delhaize, U.S. Division. LaCroix spoke to the need for more educational components for consumers, better storage techniques and greater transparency on the losses and surpluses along the supply chain. He said, “Visibility along the supply chain is an opportunity to shed light and grow awareness.”

LaCroix also leveraged Ahold Delhaize’s participation as a founding partner in the World Resources Institute’s 10x20x30 initiative — “An endeavor to bring together 10 global food retailers who have each committed to engage with 20 of their priority suppliers to halve their rates of food loss and waste by 2030,” explained LaCroix.

Nathan Fenner, co-founder at Afresh, a San Francisco-based AI-powered software company offering built-for-fresh solutions across the fresh category sector, spoke to retailers on the future of fresh produce: “Fresh is the thing that keeps customers coming back to stores; collectively U.S. retailers need to be world-class in the fresh category.”

Fenner spoke about the challenge of attaining useful data across the supply chain: “Fresh produce

has many data gaps along the supply chain — particularly when you take a traditional approach.” Instead of throwing out the old system, Fenner said, “we need to take a different approach, account for that bad data inherent to the system, and apply machine learning to target those gaps.” Fenner noted that Afresh clients, operating in over 3,000 stores, have seen 3 percent incremental sales growth coupled with a 25 percent average shrink reduction.

Panelist Luis Yepiz, chief procurement officer of The Farmlink Project, a non-profit committed to connecting farmers to food banks and “providing food access to the people who need it the most,” said, “We understand how farmers work, and we’ll make sure your produce gets out of your pipeline within 24 hours.” The Farmlink Project started in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and sees itself as a long-term sustainable organization in the fight against food insecurity and food waste. It works to recover fresh produce at key points along the supply chain.

The morning session wrapped up with a time for questions and answers with the audience. As a final challenge, Fenner urged the room to not settle for the status quo: “The challenge and opportunities here are multifaceted, but one place to start is at the root of the problem, specifically, that we’ve come to accept 30-40 percent food loss as an acceptable outcome.”

While the challenges of food waste and nutrition insecurity remain daunting, there was a felt lift in the audience, summed up by audience member, Aaron Warner, business development manager at Aden Logistics, “I’ve only been at this a little over two years and in that time I’ve seen produce go to waste, thank you for highlighting the gaps, I’m walking away here with better resources and more purpose in my work than before!”

Photo: Panelists Pete Pearson, Abby Prior, Justin LaCroix, Nathan Fenner and Luis Yepiz.

[Kyle Eberth](#)

About Kyle Eberth |

Kyle Eberth is new to the produce industry, but has grown up around it, in proclaimed "Apple Capitol of the World," Wenatchee, WA. For the past 14-years he has worked in the non-profit sector with an emphasis on brand storytelling, community engagement, and donor relationships.

Kyle graduated from Whitworth University (Spokane, WA) in 2007. He and wife Kelsey were married shortly thereafter, when they moved to Wenatchee to launch their careers. Kyle is "Dad" to Brooklyn and Hudson, together the Eberths enjoy skiing, biking, their family and friends, and playing together in the beautiful place they get to live.

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