



Product Date Labeling Initiative Frequently Asked Questions

Q: Why are you launching this initiative?

Grocery manufacturers and food retailers are joining together to streamline and standardize the wording accompanying date labels on packages to offer greater clarity about the quality and safety of products. Our new industry-wide effort will help reduce consumer confusion over dates on the product label and potentially help consumers avoid unnecessary food waste.

This is the latest example of the commitment of retailers and manufacturers to empower consumers with information to make informed decisions about their food, beverage and consumer products.

Q: How was it developed?

This common industry-wide wording for product date labels was developed by a working group of 25 board-level companies from the Grocery Manufacturers Association (GMA) and the Food Marketing Institute (FMI.) Both groups have endorsed these common phrases and encourage adoption by retailers and manufacturers across the nation.

Q: How will it change current product date labeling?

This new voluntary initiative streamlines more than 10 different and confusing date labels down to just two standard phrases. "BEST If Used By" describes product quality and "USE By" applies to the limited number of products that are highly perishable and/or have a food safety concern over time.

Q: What is the difference between "BEST If Used By" and "USE By"?

This new voluntary initiative streamlines more than 10 different and confusing date labels down to just two standard phrases on consumer products packaging.

Products carrying a "BEST if Used By" label are safe to use and consume even after the date on the package is passed, but may taste a little stale or not have the full vitamin content listed on the package.

Because "USE By" applies to the few products that are highly perishable and/or have a food safety concern over time, after the date on the "USE By" label has passed, the product should not be used or consumed and instead should be discarded.

Q: Why is company adoption of these standards voluntary? Why not make it mandatory?

This initiative is part of a larger process to bring transparency and clarity to consumers about the quality of their products; it's a conversation with the consumer that will progress over time.

Broad industry adoption of this new voluntary standard will occur over time so companies have flexibility to make the changes in a way that ensures consistency and maximum effectiveness across their product categories. It is also important to the industry that it is implemented in a way that minimizes costs to both consumers and manufacturers. A voluntary process allows manufacturers to work the new date labels into other labeling changes that are already planned or underway.

Q: Would you support a federal standard in this area?

The most important thing government can do to assist industry in reducing food waste is to work with us to avoid costly and time-consuming regulations that stifle innovation and narrow effort. Partners up and down the supply chain have taken an aggressive and proactive approach to food waste – but the solutions are not “one size fits all.” We urge Congress and the administration to continue the collaborative approach they've so far adopted.

While we are focused on rolling out and implementing our voluntary approach, we are aware of a number of proposals at the local, state and federal level. FMI and GMA have been working closely with Congress and state legislatures on this issue and will work together to address legislation in a manner consistent with our joint-industry language.

Q: How will you get companies to participate in this voluntary program?

As the leading associations for the nation's food manufacturers and retailers, we are confident that offering sound guidance that's rooted in solving a problem for the consumer will convince our respective members to join the 25 companies who have already endorsed these common phrases and encouraged adoption by retailers and manufacturers across the nation.

Q: How long will it take companies to make the change and when will consumers see products with these new terms in supermarkets?

Some of these labels are already in use in the marketplace. Retailers and manufacturers are urged to immediately begin phasing in “BEST if Used By” and “USE By” on package labels, with widespread adoption by July, 2018.

Q: What products are covered under this initiative?

Anything packaged in a food retail environment could carry one of these dates – from traditional “center store products” like cereal and crackers to sliced produce packaged for sale to meat and dairy products.

Dates are printed on many food items, but they are not required on all products. This new initiative does not require any manufacturer to put a date on their product. It merely recommends language that should be used if they chose to include a date.

Q: How do you define “perishable” and what products will include “USE By” for safety?

Perishable products are those with a potential food safety implication over time. After the date on the “USE By” label has passed, the product should not be used or consumed and instead should be discarded.

Supermarkets today have an array of fresh, frozen and prepared foods. Stores maintain quality assurance and sanitation standards to ensure shoppers receive fresh, wholesome and safe food products. After purchase, though, it's up to the shopper to take care of food items properly. The FoodKeeper, developed by FMI, Cornell University and USDA contains food safety and storage advice to help your shoppers maintain freshness and quality of foods. [www.fmi.org/foodkeeper]

Q: What do you mean by “safety or material degradation of critical performance”?

Food manufacturers and retailers want consumers to enjoy their purchased food products confident in their safety and at the peak of their performance. The “USE by” label will offer consumers the best guidance that the industry’s scientists and food safety experts can provide to ensure their safe consumption.

Food manufacturers and retailers want shoppers to trust their products and remain loyal customers – that happens best when they have safe and quality experiences with the products they buy.

Q: What impact will this initiative have on decreasing food waste?

Our product code dating initiative is the latest example of how retailers and manufacturers are stepping up to help consumers and to reduce food waste.

There is no silver bullet solution for food waste; it needs to be tackled in a range of ways, and everyone has a role to play. Consumers account for 44% of food waste in the U.S. and this will help address a portion of that waste. The food industry is engaging in this effort to provide consumers with the clearest guidance possible, so consumers can have maximum confidence in the quality and safety of the food products they buy.

Q: How much will it cost for your companies to adopt these new labeling standards?

As simple as these measures may sound, they are not simply a matter of changing the wording on a screen and hitting the print button. There are far-reaching operational considerations and numerous costs associated with redesigning package labels, which is why our associations are recommending a transition phase that is aligned with companies’ commitments to changes to the Nutrition Facts panel and SmartLabel™. We’re urging retailers and manufacturers to immediately begin phasing in BEST if Used By and USE By on package labels, with the goal of widespread adoption by July, 2018.