

**Voluntary Report** – Voluntary - Public Distribution

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**Report Name:** China Makes Moves to Reduce Food Waste

**Country:** China - People's Republic of

**Post:** Guangzhou ATO

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**Report Highlights:**

China is aiming to tackle food waste from farm to fork and everywhere in between. The country launched a clean plate campaign last summer and passed the Anti-Food Waste Law at the end of April this year. Both of these measures seem to point to China's growing interest in using its resources more sustainably. While the campaign and new law aren't expected to diminish China's demand for imported food and agriculture goods, sustainability is expected to become an increasingly important selling point for these products.

## Clean Plate Program Aimed at Reducing Food Waste

In mid-August 2020, according to local press reports, China's President Xi Jinping called on citizens, restaurants, and other food service businesses to reverse the "shocking and distressing" amounts of food waste in the country. There was speculation from different corners that this call to action was a foreshadowing of potential future food shortages resulting from COVID-19 supply chain disruptions and crop damage from the flooding along the Yangtze river. While no lasting shortages materialized, shortly after the President's pronouncement, China launched a nationwide clean plate program (光盘行动 guāngpán xíngdòng).

The current clean plate program traces its origins to an earlier volunteer movement that started in 2013. This former initiative appears to have fizzled out because there was insufficient government support. In contrast, this latest program appears to have considerable support from both the central and provincial governments, suggesting that it will likely outlive the earlier movement. Another factor that will likely contribute to the movement's longevity was the ban on using untreated plate waste in hog feed. The ban was announced in 2018 and linked to efforts to stop the spread of African Swine Fever (ASF).

## Restaurants' Approach to the Clean Plate Program

To understand the impact and changes from the clean plate initiative, FAS-China conducted a small, informal survey of consumers and restaurants in different parts of the country to hear their firsthand experiences with this program.

Chinese-style and buffet restaurants reported adopting a mix of measures to control plate waste. Some offered smaller portion sizes, provided takeaway boxes, and posted signage to discourage food waste. One Shanghai-based restaurant instituted a customer incentive program to reduce food waste. Some restaurants also trained waitstaff to help patrons from over-ordering.

In contrast, western-style restaurants were believed to have made fewer changes in their operations because their servings were already individually sized. The different atmosphere and experience found in a western-style restaurant also dictated fewer changes.

Meantime, government canteens, state-owned enterprises, and schools are reportedly implementing the clean plate program by limiting official banquets and replacing buffets with set box meals.

## Consumers Doing their Part to Reduce Food Waste

Judging by interview responses, many consumers were generally aware of the clean plate program and seem to be consciously trying to reduce food waste when dining out or preparing meals at home. Consumers thought the main reason the program had been instituted was to shore up the country's food security situation.



Restaurant signs promoting saving food and no waste.  
Source: FAS-China

Regional differences appeared to exist in people's attention to food waste. In the south and east, consumers felt that they were more traditionally modest in their restaurant orders compared to their countrymen in the northeast where a cultural tendency to over-order is said to exist. An overabundance of dishes on the restaurant table is considered a display of hospitality (and wealth), particularly in the northeast.

In the past, boxing up leftovers wasn't socially acceptable or a common practice in China. However, in recent years, taking home leftovers is increasingly accepted and restaurant waitstaff will ask patrons if they would like a box. When asked about changes at the restaurant, consumers observed that some restaurants were offering smaller portion sizes and had posted signs to remind patrons to avoid wasting food.

### **Passage of Anti-Food Waste Law**

Amid the launch of the clean plate initiative, the National People's Congress (NPC) drafted and passed an [Anti-Food Waste Law](#) that went into effect on April 29, 2021. The law intends to institute stricter management controls to reduce food waste from farm to fork in order to strengthen food security, conserve resources, and protect the environment. The new legislation contains several provisions aimed at curbing food waste at official activities, schools, restaurants, food processing operations, food retailers, and the larger grain and agriculture industry. A few notable highlights from the law follow.

- The clean plate campaign and anti-food waste concept will be popularized through different education and outreach programs. Warnings and/or fines will be imposed on businesses found to be wasting or encouraging food waste. New systems will be instituted to measure and reduce the volume of food waste.
- The HRI sector will improve its procurement practices, storage and handling procedures, educate staff, and use signs and other incentives to discourage patrons from wasting food. Restaurants will be able to reward customers for participating in the clean plate program and charge a fee to those patrons who waste food.
- Food processors will improve storage and handling procedures, transportation, processing conditions, and will increase utilization rates. Shelf-life standards should be science-based and prominently displayed. Retailers will categorize and label foods approaching the expiration date.
- In line with [China's 2021 No 1 Document](#), the government will improve its production, storage, transportation and processing standards for grains and other agriculture products.

The law comes on the heels of joint anti-food waste guidance issued by several Chinese ministries and regulatory agencies in February 2021. The joint guidance largely coincided with the contents of the new law.

## **Clean Plate and Anti-Food Waste Law Not Expected to Slow Import Demand**

The clean plate campaign and the Anti-Food Waste Law aren't expected to diminish China's growing appetite for imported food and agriculture products. However, sustainability is expected to become an increasingly important selling point for both domestic and imported food and agriculture products. For example, [plant-based meat alternatives](#) and beverages are already playing up this sustainability angle in the China marketplace. U.S. companies should consider how best to highlight product sustainability when marketing to Chinese consumers.

### **Attachments:**

No Attachments.