Scrapping the Scraps:
Action Against Food Waste

A Policy Brief to Support Castor Freegan and Advance Sustainability at EPFL

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Photo from **One Third** *series by Klaus Pichler (2010–2012). Available at:* https://www.kpic.at/one-third/

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Overview

Executive Summary

Switzerland wastes 2.8 million tons of food annually, costing each person over CHF 600 and generating half a ton of CO_2 [1]. While national and institutional efforts address this challenge, EPFL has an immediate opportunity through Castor Freegan - a student-led initiative that already rescues surplus food from local Migros, serving 6,000+ free meals annually, preventing 5 tons of waste [2]. Currently operating with minimal support, this program can double its impact with basic infrastructure such as kitchen access and refrigeration. By investing in these solutions now, EPFL can transform Castor Freegan from a grassroots effort into a model community-driven program that simultaneously reduces food waste, advances institutional climate goals, and addresses student food insecurity - proving that **practical climate action starts on campus.**

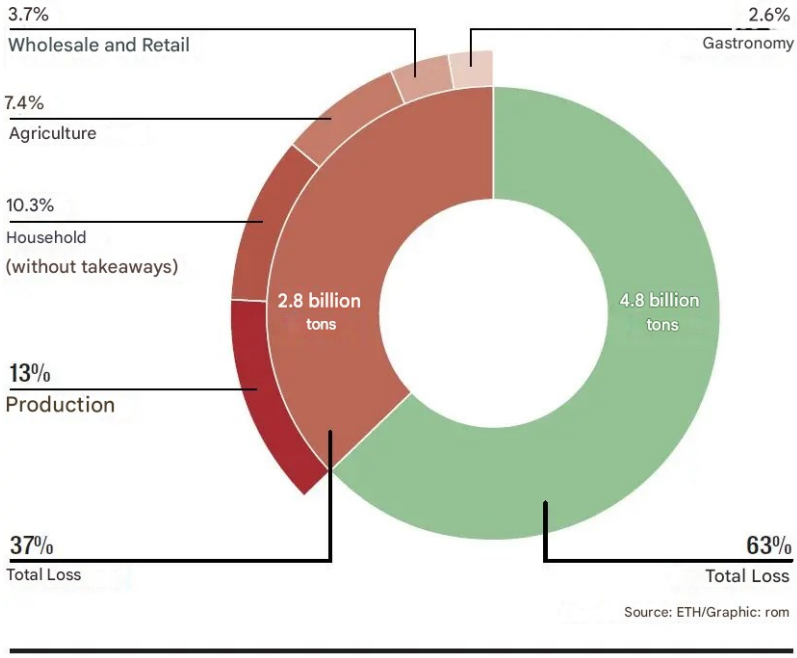
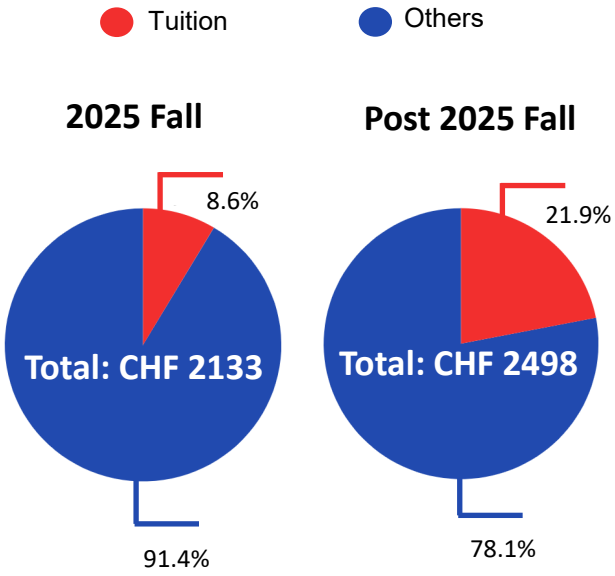


Figure 1: Breakdown of food disposal pathways in Switzerland, 2019

"Our goal is not just redistribution, but re-education. We want students to see food differently—less as a product and more as a resource."
— Castor Freegan Committee Member

Monthly Cost of Living of International Students



Source: https://www.studienfinanzierung.uzh.ch/

Figure 2: Rise in monthly expenditure of international students

Problems

1. Ongoing Food Waste on Campus

Despite existing efforts, large amounts of edible food are still discarded daily by EPFL vendors and partners. The current reliance on the Too Good To Go program captures only a small fraction of this waste. Without a dedicated campus infrastructure for food recovery, significant food waste persists. This issue reflects a broader challenge, with 37% of food wasted across the supply chain (Figure 1) in Switzerland.

2. Insufficient Institutional Support

Castor Freegan currently operates out of a limited and inaccessible basement space with no cold storage or reliable kitchen access. This restricts the amount and type of food they can recover, especially perishable items like dairy, fruits, or prepared meals from Migros supermarkets.

3. Growing Student Financial Pressure

Students, particularly international students and those on hardship scholarships, are facing growing challenges due to rising living costs (Figure 2). The situation will worsen significantly in autumn 2025 when many international students' tuition fees triple, exacerbating their financial pressures. Despite these difficulties, many at-risk students remain unaware of available food support programs.

Strategies I

Food Recovery Actors

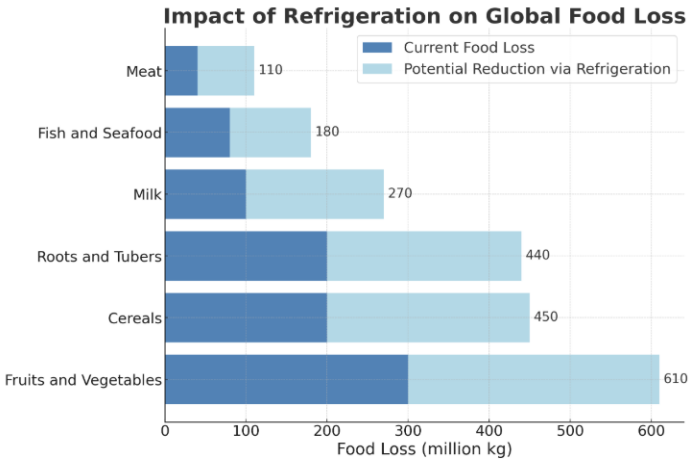
Castor Freegan is an award-winning food recovery initiative and an association part of Unipoly, run by a committee of around 5 students from EPFL and UNIL and supported by 5-10 additional staff volunteers for bigger events. They organize events using unsold food donated by local Migros supermarkets stores. Committee members, staff and volunteers prepare free-of-charge vegetarian meals for to the local community in a nearby student accommodation, Vortex. Their impact has been recognized by EPFL in its latest update report, serving 350 people monthly [3]. The charity association, Table Suisse works in conjunction with Castor Freegan to provide food transport from Migros to EPFL.

Policy Recommendations

1. Allocate Dedicated Cool Storage

Food waste can occur during the recovery process if logistical challenges—particularly inadequate storage—are not properly addressed. Castor Freegan reports that 20–30% of all collected food is lost on-site, with even higher rates in summer due to insufficient temperature control. Time constraints in logistics often require meal preparation to begin the night before open-door events, but perishable items like leafy greens, salad dressings, and prepared meals are highly prone to spoilage without refrigeration.

A Brazilian study [4] found that stores without refrigeration wasted 28% of their produce within two months, compared to just 9% at stores with cooling units. This aligns with global trends (Figure 3), where refrigeration consistently reduces food loss across diverse regions and contexts. The same principle applies to household settings, where proper cooling extends shelf life significantly.



Adapted from https://seas.umich.edu/news/improved-refrigeration-could-save-nearly-half-13-billion-tons-food-wasted-each-year-globally

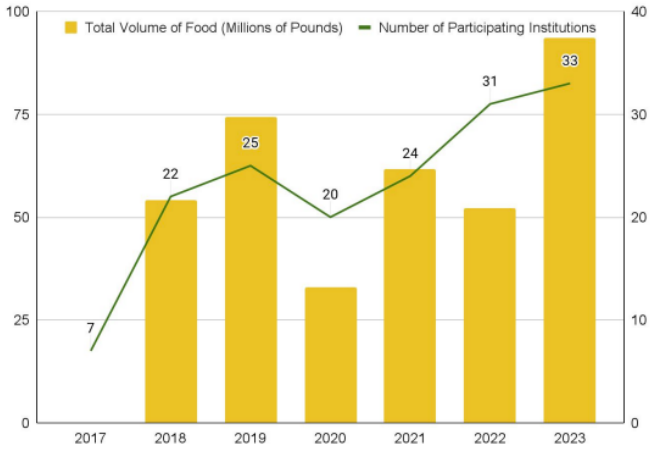
Figure 3: Comparison of food waste levels with and without refrigeration

To minimize spoilage and salvage unsold dairy and other perishables, we propose installing a commercial-grade refrigerator at Castor Freegan's EPFL location. This solution would provide safe, temporary storage for recovered food, reduce avoidable waste by addressing the primary spoilage risk while aligning with Castor Freegan's mission of efficient food recovery. This can be supported by the Vice Presidency for Operations (VPO) office, which manages campus operations including food services, safety and facilities.

2. Provide Campus Kitchen or Access to Shared Facilities

To maximize its impact, Castor Freegan requires institutional support to establish reliable food recovery infrastructure. The student group needs either regular access to certified on-campus kitchen facilities such as the Vortex or EPFL Catering kitchens or dedicated funding to secure off-campus cooking space that meets food safety standards. Currently, their reliance on temporary, ad hoc locations severely limits both the quantity and consistency of meals they can provide. Proper infrastructure would enable them to safely process recovered surplus food at scale, transforming potential waste into hundreds of nutritious meals each week.

The VPO's office must take decisive action to facilitate this transition. This includes brokering formal agreements with



Source: MCURC Collective Impact Initiative Progress Report 2024, slide 7. The Culinary Institute of America. https://www.ciaprochef.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/MCURC-Collective-Impact-Initiative-Progress-Report-2024.pdf

Figure 4: Number of MCURC Partner Institutions and the scale of food waste handling

EPFL Catering to allocate dedicated kitchen hours with proper equipment, while establishing clear protocols for surplus food redistribution. Additionally, the VPO should

Strategies II

secure modest annual funding (estimated at CHF 5,000-10,000) to cover essential equipment, storage and/or space renting needs, ensuring operations can maintain both regular scheduling and proper hygiene standards. These steps would lay the foundation for a sustainable, long-term program.

The success of the Menus of Change University Research Collaborative (MCURC) network (Figure 4) demonstrates this model's effectiveness—their 33 member institutions have reduced food waste by 30-50% [5] through similar programs, often using campus kitchens, collectively saving over 100 million pounds of food as of 2023. To ensure EPFL remains at the forefront of sustainable campus initiatives, the VPO should convene all relevant stakeholders by the start of the fall semester to implement a pilot program, addressing both food waste reduction and student food insecurity in one comprehensive solution.

3. Open Communication Channels to Students in Need

Food insecurity among students is not only a nutritional concern, but also a communication issue. According to Murray et al. [6], nearly 38% of university students experience food insecurity, and almost half of these students are dissatisfied with the availability of affordable food on campus. Many students remain disconnected from existing food support due to limited awareness, social stigma, or a lack of clear pathways to access it. Corney et al. [7] similarly show that international students face multiple barriers to help-seeking, including language and cultural differences, stigma, and not knowing where to go for support. As shown in Figure 5, these challenges translate into concrete indicators of food insecurity, such as worry about food running out and reductions in intake. Without more visible and direct communication, students who are most vulnerable risk being left out of initiatives meant to support them. While there is limited information on these studies in Switzerland, EPFL still benefits from 2900 scholarship students in the student body, hence it is imperative to ensure their continued well-being.

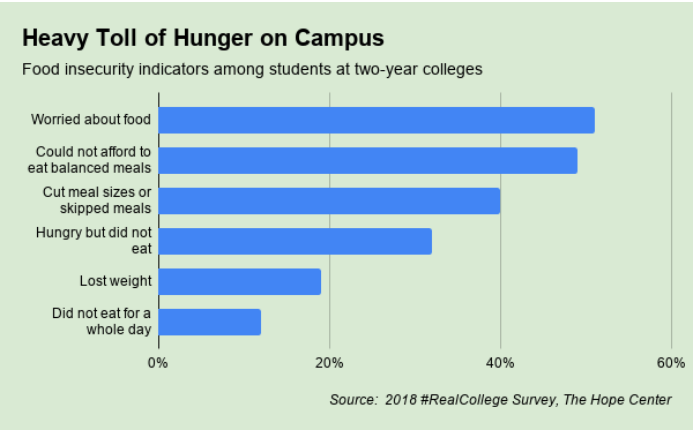


Figure 5: Indicators of food insecurity in university students

Castor Freegan plays a vital role in addressing this need, fostering a sense of community around shared values of sustainability and mutual aid. At present, outreach is largely community-driven, using platforms like social media and peer-to-peer sharing. While this approach has been effective in building an engaged network, some students facing financial hardship, including scholarship recipients, international students, and those on hardship funds may still remain unaware of the initiative.

To strengthen and extend its impact, we propose facilitating closer collaboration between Castor Freegan and the Student Services Office, particularly with units supporting scholarships, hardship funds, and incoming international students. By integrating information about Castor Freegan's free meal events and food recovery work into key points of student contact such as orientation sessions, financial aid communications, or wellbeing consultations, the initiative can ensure that its support reaches the students most likely to benefit from it.

Impact Projections

The projected benefits of the proposed policies are detailed in Table 1.

Table 1: Projected reductions in food waste and improvements in sustainability.

Action	Food Saved (tons/year)	Meals Provided	CO_2 Emissions Avoided (kg/year)
Current (2024)	5	6,000	~10,000
With Infrastructure	10+	12,000+	20,000+

Estimates based on WWF and Swiss Food Waste data: 1 ton of food waste ≈ 2,000 kg CO_2.

Beyond quantitative measures, supporting Castor Freegan creates 50+ annual student engagement opportunities in practical sustainability work. This aligns with EPFL's mission to develop eco-conscious engineers and scientists.

Conclusion & References

Conclusions

EPFL's 2030 sustainability targets demand concrete action, not just aspiration. Castor Freegan has proven that student-led initiatives can deliver measurable reductions in food waste, but their current ad hoc model is needlessly constrained. With basic institutional support (kitchen access, funding, and coordination), this existing program could triple its impact overnight.

This isn't about pioneering untested ideas. It's about implementing proven solutions that peer institutions have already demonstrated:

1. Double meal output using effective storage strategies
2. Cut avoidable food waste by 30-50%
3. Advance EPFL's plant-based meal goals through efficient redistribution

EPFL doesn't need to reinvent the wheel, just provide the tools to allow effective student work flourish. The time for half-measures is over; real infrastructure unlocks real results.

Key Contacts

1. VPO Office for building infrastructure support:

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2. Catering and shops:

Bruno Rossignol

3. Health:

S. Karlen

4. Point of contact with scholarship recipients:

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5. Communication officers:

Gaël Hurlimann

References

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Source: https://www.shutterstock.com/image-photo/life-circle-apple-fruit-fresh-rotten-2154245875

Apples taste better when eaten—not studied.