

The problem with zero-waste goals is the word 'waste'

By [Jim Giles](#) January 22, 2021



The pasta and snacks in the Zenb product portfolio are made using [parts of plants that are usually discarded](#), such as stems, seeds and peels. Photo courtesy of Zenb

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Last week, I mentioned a [project in the Netherlands](#) that puts circular thinking at the heart of plans for a more sustainable food system. Afterward, I realized that the project jumped out at me partly because this kind of thinking is so rare, at least in the private sector. This makes no sense. We know that circular economy strategies can create profits, cut waste and reduce emissions. Why aren't these approaches more common?

Before answering, I'll back up quickly for people new to circular thinking. Most industrial systems are linear: We extract a resource, which could be anything from timber to crude oil; transform it into a product, often with little concern for the waste produced along the way; then trash that product when we're done with it. A circular system, by contrast, prioritizes the regeneration of natural systems, the designing out of waste and finding ways to extend the life of products.

Food and ag is beginning to deliver on that first principle: the use of cover crops, rotational grazing and other regenerative techniques is growing rapidly. But every week I hear from food and ag companies that want to highlight their sustainability projects, and very few focus on the idea of redesigning systems to eliminate waste. Why is that?

The most obvious answer is that it's cheaper to simply send waste to landfills. That's true in some cases, but there are plenty of examples of companies that are discovering value in what was previously waste:

- A new InnovaFeed plant In Illinois will use [crop residues from a neighboring corn processing facility](#) to rear insects for animal feed.
- Upward Farms recently raised \$15 million to combine fish farming with indoor ag: The nitrogen-rich waste water from the fish tanks will be [used to fertilize leafy greens](#).
- [BioEnergy Devco](#) transforms chicken poop into natural gas.
- The pasta and snacks in Zenb, a new range from the Japanese food company Mizkan, are made using [parts of plants that are usually discarded](#), such as stems, seeds and peels.

These companies are united by more than innovative systems. Underlying their processes and technologies is an innovation in thinking: That all materials are potentially valuable and should never be written off as waste. And that's something we need more of.

"Right now, the thinking is very muddled in industry," said Emma Chow, who

leads food projects at the Ellen MacArthur Foundation, a leading advocate for the circular economy. "When we speak to companies about opportunities in waste streams, they say we're doing everything we can. Then we dig into it and realize they don't know what's in these streams."

That shortsightedness comes in part from something that sustainability advocates normally celebrate: zero-waste goals. Chow suggests that these goals have the unintended effect of labeling certain materials as needing to be eliminated: "It's a mindset about looking at something as bad instead of saying, 'What value and opportunities does this hold?'"

I'm curious as to how widespread this muddled thinking is. Is it present in your company? And what value could you unlock by doing away with the concept of waste? (It's a little late for New Year's resolutions, but that would be an amazing goal for 2021.) Shoot your thoughts to jg@greenbiz.com, and I'll feature as many responses as I can in future newsletters.