LABELLING FOOD IN SOUTH AFRICA

Food products are not legally required to have explanatory text to define date labels. This leaves interpretation up to the consumer. The misunderstanding of these labels is often the cause of further unnecessary waste.

Food labels are provided for under the Foodstuffs, Cosmetics and Disinfectants Act 54 of 1972. “Regulations Relating to the Labelling and Advertising of Foodstuffs, R149.

The latest regulations, R429, are to be passed soon.

The following foodstuffs and ingredients are exempt from dates of durability: alcoholic beverages, chewing gum, confectionary products of flavoured and coloured sugars, unpicked and uncut fruit and vegetables, processed meat, honey, ready-to-eat flour confectionary, sugars, unprocessed and unpacked fish, meat and poultry, and vinegar.

This means that some non-perishable food products have date labels, even though their shelf lives go long beyond those. This includes pasta and rice.

‘The date on which the food becomes the product as described.’

Indicates ‘the date which signifies the end of the period ... during which the product will remain fully marketable and will retain any specific qualities …’.

The food is still safe to eat and will have deteriorated in quality only.

Indicates ‘the last date of offer for sale to the consumer after which there remains a reasonable storage period at home.’

This date is not meant for the consumer, but merely indicates to the retailer when the supplier would like the product to be removed from the shelves.

‘The date which signifies the end of the estimated period ... after which the product probably will not have the quality attributes normally expected ... food should not be regarded as marketable.’

This date is applied to fresh perishable and pre-packed food items. It is illegal to sell food past this date.

Source: Inspired by a similar representation by the Harvard Food Law and Policy Clinic and Natural Resources Defense Council on US Food Date labels.