

CONGEBEC'S MISSION TO DRIVE CHANGE IN FOOD WASTE REDUCTION

Editor's Note: Food Waste Focus is a new feature for Cold Facts. Each issue, one member or initiative that is meeting the goals and objectives of the Global Cold Chain Foundation's Food Maximization project will be featured.



No one wants to see good food thrown away, especially when people are hungry in our communities. Few have the power to act, and even those that do, don't always have the focus or leadership capacity to make a difference. That is why the story of the Canadian cold storage business Congebec's food waste program is so inspiring.

It's leadership is making a real difference in the lives and health of people across their home province of Quebec, Canada. Food insecurity is a constant and growing problem. In fact, one in six people who depend on food banks in Canada hold a full-time job. As of March 2023, Canada saw a 78.8% increase in food bank clients between 2018 and 2023.

"For us, it's obvious that with our expertise in freezing, we need to support the food relief network in preserving food and enabling it to be distributed optimally," says Nicholas-P. Pedneault, CEO of Congebec.

Working in partnership with Food Banks of Quebec, Congebec has implemented a three-step strategy.

1. Donate Storage Space

Since starting its program, Congebec has made storage space available for 500,000 kg of food a month, including at their new freezer in Mascouche, Montreal, which will expand their warehouse business in the region.

Catherine Lambert, Communication, Employer Branding & Government Affairs Strategist at Congebec, explains why the company is so pleased to be taking this initiative. "It may not be our product but we handle it every day, and we see opportunities to salvage food all the time, for example when a case is

broken and the rest of the pallet is still safely packaged and safe to eat, up to 2,200 pounds of product is at risk of being destroyed. Knowing it could be thrown away is heart-breaking," she says.

What Congebec has learned is that donating space is about more than just allocating a section of the warehouse. Initially the project was slowed down by manual tracking and adjustment processes. It took hours of resources for both partners. To resolve this, Congebec led the integration of the food bank's data into its warehouse management system, significantly speeding up and professionalizing the process.

2. Recruit Customer Support

Congebec does not own the food that it stores and moves. It can only act if it recruits customers as partners in the initiative, so it must obtain written permission from customers for each donation when food is in danger of being destroyed. It cannot all be saved, but Congebec is taking a proactive approach and encouraging its customers to donate this safe-to-eat product when possible. Lambert says, "Sometimes, it's a matter of having no alternative for the customer, which we are able to provide with our network and partnership with Food Banks of Quebec."

It is also vital that all parties understand the rules. In Canada the so called "Good Samaritan" laws allow for legal protection from liability for those who partake in the safe donation of foods, encouraging donations to food banks from food companies. Congebec's understanding of the rules can help customers to have the reassurance they need to allow the donation.

Food Banks of Quebec and its affiliates are experts in food recovery and redistribution throughout the region, with a network that spans 44 million kilograms (over 97 million pounds) of food—worth 444.6 million CAD (approximately 327.5 million USD) annually—which is distributed to the 1,200 organizations it serves. Assisting over 870,000 people monthly, their network solicits donations from throughout the provinces and serves as part of the Food Banks Canada network. According to their 2022-2023 Annual Report, Food Banks of Quebec received most donations from agri-food businesses, however, post-pandemic, they found themselves having to purchase food to service the growing need. A \$6.4 M grant from the Canadian Government and \$8 M grant from the Government of Quebec tied over the food bank network for food purchases between 2022-2023, however donations remain key. Partnerships are vital to Food Banks of Quebec's operation.



Food Banks of Quebec is nominated for its Frozen Food Rescue Program with Congebec at the prestigious Canadian food industry awards, the DUX Grand Prix 2024. (Photo courtesy of Congebec.)

3. Provide Mentorship

Congebec lends its expertise, providing its food bank partner with seasoned input on facility construction and often offering a second opinion on building elements or tools.

The partnership is natural, with the Congebec team in a position to offer seamless mentorship and assistance to food banks. In an almost identical line of work, food banks and warehouses share a goal of safely storing and supplying food to keep meals on everyone's table. Food banks, however, manage their food supply in a far more manual way – often manipulating cases and products – while warehouses have tools to automate or handle in mass.

Where Next?

Given the success of its partnership with Food Banks of Quebec so far, Congebec has ambitions to launch a partnership with Food Banks

Canada and team up with customers to offer them a fast-track alternative to destroying products. Food Banks Canada works with over 750 Affiliate Member Food Banks, operating with partners in retail, agriculture, processors and manufacturers to safely handle food. Through this, Food Banks Canada has annually moved over 163 million kg (over 360 million pounds) of food.

As the Global Cold Chain Foundation Vice President Amanda Brondy says, “Given Congebec’s success so far there is very little reason to doubt that they will achieve their goals to scale up their program to benefit people across Canada. I also know that businesses across the world of cold chain can learn so much from the Congebec experience, and there is more that can be done to replicate the legislative and tax incentives that have helped them and Food Banks of Quebec along the way.” 🔄

Volunteers

The program is more than part of the day-to-day job expectation for Congebec staff. The initiative has inspired colleagues to go further with volunteering programs. Employees gathered around the Christmas holiday to collect non-perishable food products in facilities to donate to food banks. Their teams also donate their freezer jackets; for five years they’ve been upcycling the jackets – cleaning and then donating them.

When processing a delivery, one Congebec employee even went out of their way with their sump pump to clean a food bank’s flooded loading dock door during a rainstorm, preventing their operation.