

“There’s definitely still opportunity at the field and plant level.”

AN INTERVIEW WITH

Nicole Flewell, Director of Sustainability at Taylor Farms

Nicole Flewell is the Director of Sustainability at Taylor Farms, the world’s largest processor of fresh-cut vegetables. She sat down with Amy Ahearn, Associate Director, Acumen, and Alexandria Coari, Capital and Innovation Director, ReFED, to describe how Taylor Farms fights food waste and the opportunities she sees for nonprofit organizations to bring fresh, prepared food to low-income individuals.

This interview was produced as part of [The ReFED Nonprofit Food Recovery Accelerator](#).



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AMY AHEARN: *Can you give us a quick summary of Taylor Farms, your products, and the unique role you play as a producer and manufacturer?*

NICOLE FLEWELL: Taylor Farms is North America's favorite maker of salads and healthy fresh foods. We were founded in 1995 by our founder and CEO, Bruce Taylor. We're a family-owned company. Our headquarters are in Salinas, California. We produce 180 million servings of fresh food on a weekly basis.

We have 17 operating companies across North America. We operate three lines of business. Our Foodservice operations, such as major food distribution companies that deliver to restaurants, hotels, and schools as well as many quick-service restaurants. We also supply retailers and grocery stores with products like bagged salads, party trays, and vegetable medleys. Our chop salad kits have become one of our biggest staples over the last few years. Our newest line is deli, which is all of our fresh prepared food that you'd find in the deli section of a grocery store. This would include grab-and-go items like sandwiches, yogurt, parfait, and enchiladas that can be heated up for a quick meal.

AMY: *What is your role at Taylor Farms? How did you get started there?*

NICOLE: I'm the Director of Sustainability. I oversee all of our facilities across North America, implementing our sustainability



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IMAGE CREDIT: TAYLOR FARMS

initiatives. I also work directly with our customers, helping them achieve their sustainability goals and implementing those within our operations facilities and out to our supply chain. I've been at the company for ten years and have worked in a series

of roles including administration, food safety and quality assurance, and business intelligence. I've been in this role focused on sustainability for four years.

AMY: Can you describe how Taylor Farms has thought about fighting food waste to date? What lessons have you learned about how to most effectively prevent food waste?

NICOLE: We are in the business of not wasting anything. Our raw product is our highest operating cost so we're very focused on getting the highest yield out of the field

and in the plant. We are very motivated to fight food waste because we not only want to avoid leaving great food in the field that is intended for someone to eat, but we also want to maximize efficiency.

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One of the biggest things that we've done to maximize yield is to invest in automated harvesting machinery. We use it for harvesting romaine, cabbage, celery, spinach, and leafy greens. We are working on broccoli and iceberg. These are machines that come into the field and allow us to maximize the output that we're getting from the field. There's really no head of lettuce left behind.

The machinery has optical sorters that will look for debris like rocks or sticks or any leaves that might have some insect damage on it and reject those at the source, depositing them back into the field. Those are really the only products that we're leaving behind in the field and those get tilled back into the ground to manage soil health and nutrient development. We're ensuring that we're not bringing in any of that foreign material into our facilities that could potentially become a food safety concern.

ALEXANDRIA COARI: How does Taylor Farms think about the EPA Food Recovery Hierarchy? Are you trying to move up that hierarchy and get more edible food to people in need?

NICOLE: We utilize the EPA food recovery hierarchy every day in our operations. We work to get all of our product intended

for consumption out to consumers. That's our number one priority. However if there are products that aren't eligible to send to consumers but still safe for consumption, we have a great local partnerships with food banks and other local organizations to pick up and bring back food and get it out to our local communities.

Then any organic material that is not eligible for human consumption will go to either compost or animal feed. We're always looking to manage the organics that we're sending to landfill and our goal is zero.

We found one challenge used to be the fact that the sanitation team would come in at the end of the second shift and only have a couple hours to get the facility cleaned up and ready for production the next morning. They were taking anything that was on the floor and mixing it all up, rather than source separating, and it was going to landfill. At one facility, we're putting all that waste in separate bins and, first thing in the morning, a team runs it through a mini MRF pulling out contaminants and then sends the remaining organic materials into our compost and animal feed stream. That's helped us divert an additional one million pounds from landfill annually.

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AMY: *Do you see opportunities for more excess food to be diverted from farms to feed the hungry?*

NICOLE: There's definitely still opportunity at the farm level. The challenge is that if we're going to disc a field—meaning we're going to put that material back into the

ground and not harvest it—that's because the market is totally flush with it.

There are opportunities for good food that could be eligible for recovery, but the challenge is that during those times, there's generally no market for it. Some of the food recovery groups looking to resell product

would end up in the same situation as us because there would not be any market demand for them either.

There are some groups in Salinas who go back in for second cuts or a second harvest in the form of gleaning, but it's a very small amount of material. We also have some groups interested in taking our byproducts.



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IMAGE CREDIT: TAYLOR FARMS

For example, they might be looking at using the top and bottom parts of celery because they have partnerships with juicing companies. That's "product" we would have left in the field or given to animal feed or compost. So there are opportunities to get more waste out of the fields; they're harder to manage, but that doesn't mean it's not possible.

If there was a group that wanted to come in and harvest material that might otherwise

be disked, I think we would be totally game for solutions like that. We haven't seen anybody that wants to do that yet.

ALEXANDRIA: *What is the main factor determining whether or not you harvest a field?*

NICOLE: Food safety, quality and market demand determine whether a field is going to be harvested or not. When you're in a market situation, factors such as labor costs,

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harvest costs, processing costs, freight costs, and logistical costs get factored into the equation.

In market situations disking the field is sometimes the most cost effective option but we're working on improving our forecasting to ensure that we don't have fields that we have to disc.

AMY: Do you see any other opportunities for food recovery organizations to partner with farms?

NICOLE: I see opportunity for recovery at the plant level with raw products that we've received. When product gets harvested, it comes to the facility and passes all of our food safety checks. We cool it and store it but then—for whatever reason—an order might get cancelled, or there might have been a miscalculation or error in forecasting—and we end up finding ourselves on occasion with great raw product that is totally eligible for human consumption that would be great for a food recovery organization.

We're trying to get better at engaging with the food banks to take that raw product because it's great for organizations where they're preparing the food on site and aren't looking for a finished product. We'd

love to find more partners who could use that raw material when it's available.

AMY: Taylor Farms specializes in developing fresh, healthy prepared meals for a mass market. Are there any lessons you've learned that might be useful for nonprofits trying to develop similar prepared meals for low-income populations?

NICOLE: We have a whole product development team that is always exploring new recipes and trying to find unique and interesting ingredients to combine together to make flavors that appeal to folks. These might be ingredients that not everyone would be familiar with; for example, something like bok choy. However, bok choy is one of the ten ingredients in our stir fry kits and if you chop it up, saute it, and put a delicious sauce on it with some protein or some rice, that's a meal.

One challenge that we've seen here in our local community is that there are cultural differences in the types of produce people consume. For example, someone might never buy a head of bok choy if it was sold separately. However if you introduce new products in the context of meal kits and recipes and do outreach and a little bit of education, you can introduce a new product into people's diets for a lifetime.

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AMY: *Any other advice you would share with nonprofits trying to tackle food waste and get more food to the hungry?*

NICOLE: A big hurdle is the infrastructure challenges on the nonprofit side. If possible, partner with others that already have the infrastructure to ensure that your supply chain can absorb donated or recovered foods.

For example, think about establishing relationships with a local cooler. If we have excess spinach and a local nonprofit had a relationship with a cooler where we could take that product, then we could easily donate it. It gets more complicated and expensive and creates more barriers if we have to manage cooling and storing that product through our network. That's going to prevent us from engaging. So you really need to understand the supply chain from field to fork on the nonprofit side. It's vital to have all those pieces in place.

