

# FOOD WASTE RECYCLING: THE WHERE AND THE HOW

WHITE PAPER

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Food waste is the **single largest component of the country's overall waste stream**, accounting for roughly 21 percent of the total amount of garbage reaching landfills and incinerators.

Food waste is by no means a new issue. Concerns about access to nutrition and edible food being wasted stretch back centuries. The current food waste issue in the U.S. involves a focus on the scale of the problem and the environmental and financial drawbacks that come along with such a substantial level of waste. Organizations that generate a lot of food waste, from restaurants and grocery stores to universities and large hospitals, have plenty of incentives to reduce and eventually eliminate such refuse. Not only are there financial benefits, but opportunities to appeal to stakeholders and help the local and global environment as well.

## **UNDERSTANDING THE MAGNITUDE OF THE FOOD WASTE ISSUE**

Food waste is the single largest component of the country's overall waste stream, accounting for roughly 21 percent of the total amount

of garbage reaching landfills and incinerators. Considering 20 percent of methane emissions come from landfills, the connection between food waste and pollution is clear. Another way to take stock of this issue is to consider how much food is left uneaten. USDA projections find waste accounts for between 30-40 percent of the total food supply, a staggering figure that helps contextualize the sheer volume of waste seen across all industries and steps in the supply chain.

Food waste is an issue for several reasons. The production of methane and other waste gases that contribute to climate change is an important factor to consider, but far from the only one. The number of people in the U.S. that lack regular, secure access to food is another point to consider. About 42 million Americans live in food insecure households, meaning they have impediments to consistent access to safe, edible foods.

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# The major national initiative targeting the issue and encouraging food waste recycling and other measures is the EPA's United States 2030 Food Loss and Waste Reduction Goal.

The financial costs of food waste must also be addressed. A USDA estimate found \$161 billion in food waste per year. Simply put, businesses lose money when they waste food.

Reducing food waste helps address all of these problems. That means correcting a single issue through minimizing food waste provides a wide range of powerful benefits.

## STATE AND FEDERAL GOALS FOR FOOD WASTE REDUCTION

The scale and widespread reach of food waste issues haven't escaped officials on the federal or state levels. The major national initiative targeting the issue and encouraging food waste recycling and other measures is the EPA's United States 2030 Food Loss and Waste Reduction Goal. The plan, which works in conjunction with other agencies like the USDA and draws on sustainability goals set by the United Nations, calls for a 50-percent reduction in total food loss and waste

by 2030. The EPA plans to reach this ambitious goal by proactively engaging individuals, businesses and organizations with information and actionable advice that facilitates positive change.

On the state level, there are a few leading the pack in terms of developing and enforcing regulations that encourage responsible disposal, food waste reduction and other important processes. Many have tax incentives to provide a return on the time and labor invested in handling this workflow. One thing they have in common is a gradual rollout of regulations and similarly slow but steady increases in the scope of their mandatory and voluntary initiatives:

- ▶ **Vermont** will impose a zero food waste rule in 2020, the culmination of years of work toward that goal. Nearly all businesses and individuals will be expected to sort garbage and compost their food scraps, an initiative supported by an accompanying law requiring curbside garbage collectors to gather and properly dispose of compost as well.



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California has a goal of 75 percent food waste diversion via composting and recycling as well as reduction.

- ▶ **Massachusetts** has focused on large producers of food waste, those that generate a ton or more weekly. Those businesses and organizations cannot throw food waste into the trash. The state simultaneously invested in technical assistance for all stakeholders, boosting understanding and compliance. The rule is part of a larger state goal to divert 35 percent of food waste from landfill by 2020.
- ▶ **California** has a goal of 75 percent food waste diversion via composting and recycling as well as reduction. State rules currently cover businesses that generate 4 cubic yards of waste or more per week and require them to use an organic waste recycling service. In 2019, the requirement will extend to all businesses that produce 4 cubic yards or more of commercial solid waste per week. The state will assess progress in 2021 and, if disposal levels are not at 50 percent or less of 2014 levels, it will expand the requirement to businesses producing 2 yards or more of commercial solid waste per week. The state uses tax incentives to encourage excess food donations from farms and extends that benefit to transportation companies that carry the food. Other similar programs help create a collaborative, holistic approach.
- ▶ **Oregon** has a state food waste reduction plan that aims to recover 25 percent of waste and put it to other uses - whether donations, composting or other applications - by 2020. The state also encourages municipalities to implement and support food rescue programs.
- ▶ **Washington's** Department of Ecology spearheads a number of programs to reduce food waste, with state universities, food producers, grocers, large entertainment venues and many others that encourage donations and composting while reducing waste. There is no statewide law in place, but municipalities like Seattle prohibit the placement of food waste and



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The additional time and labor needed to manage donations and fears of potential liability for unknowingly donating spoiled food are major issues that can **stop large producers of food waste from doing so.**

other recyclables in their garbage containers, with a goal of achieving at least 60 percent recycling and composting for all waste on an ongoing basis.

- ▶ **Minnesota** successfully encouraged a number of supermarkets and other major generators of food waste to more efficiently and responsibly handle diversion and recycling, and has a number of government-funded, statewide, voluntary programs for that purpose. Businesses and multi-family dwellings in seven of the state's counties that fall into specific industrial classifications and produce more than four cubic yards of waste per week must recycle, including food waste. The state has a 75 percent recycling goal set for 2030, covering its metro areas.
- ▶ **New York City** has spent millions of dollars on a campaign to reduce food waste, including laws related to diversion requirements for businesses and recycling

on the individual level. Combining requirements, education, outreach and facilitation of new programs, this approach has drawn praise from environmentalist groups like the Natural Resources Defense Council. The city's ultimate goal is reducing overall waste production by 90 percent on or before 2030. Restaurants with 15,000 square feet or more of floor space, chains with 100 or more locations in the city and grocery stores with 25,000 square feet or more of floor space, as well as certain other large businesses like stadiums, are covered under the law.

## **POTENTIAL ROADBLOCKS TO IMPROVED FOOD WASTE RECYCLING**

The additional time and labor needed to manage donations and fears of potential liability for unknowingly donating spoiled food are major issues that can stop large producers of food waste from doing so. However, a federal law that isn't currently well-known in all circles, the



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Quest develops zero waste solutions that take your company's specific needs and processes into account, yielding **especially effective and relevant results.**

Bill Emerson Good Samaritan Act, limits food donor liability to cases of gross negligence when giving items to nonprofit organizations.

The time and labor issues are more complicated as a state-level issue, but working with an experienced and knowledgeable provider can help your business streamline workflows and create an efficient solution from start to finish. Additionally, the tax incentives involved in donating edible food can create substantial incentives for businesses to invest the money and time needed to create an effective diversion program and enjoy both financial and community-based benefits.

## **FINDING A GREAT PARTNER TO HELP YOU SUBSTANTIALLY REDUCE FOOD WASTE**

Quest develops zero waste solutions that take your company's specific needs and processes into account, yielding especially effective and relevant results. With benefits including 24/7/365 support from your account management team, nationwide coast to coast food waste recycling program, you can count on Quest to help your organization realize the most effective food waste recycling program possible. To learn more, get in touch with us today.

To get in touch, call us at 877-321-1811 or email [solutions@questrmg.com](mailto:solutions@questrmg.com).

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