

Food Collection program best practices

At the beginning of 2017, there are few, if any, communities with mandatory curbside collection of food residuals east of the Mississippi River. Mandatory programs tend to be in west-coast cities and the Pacific Northwest. Several communities in the Northeast have curbside collection for organics, but none are mandatory at the residential level.

All of the individuals interviewed stressed the following several points as important in communications about recycling organic materials, regardless of how it's done.

- Scheduling curbside pickup so that organics and other recycling is picked up twice as often as trash/MSW is a valuable compliance strategy; customers will not want to put their food waste in their trash if they have to keep it around for a couple of weeks, for example. Frequent pickup of organics also reduces problems with various forms of wildlife.
- It's important to make the process as easy and inexpensive as possible. Supplying containers, compostable bags, regular pickups, and offering telephone or online assistance are all important.
- Making sure households get clear instructions about how and what to separate as food scraps and other recycling and waste, especially using photographs, is important.
- Establishing costs as incentives can be helpful when they are directly attached to specific behaviors, less so when embedded in taxes. For instance, a pay-per-bag system for solid waste with lower- or no-cost recycling improves recycling rates. Offering a free quantity of compost to residents can be a helpful incentive.
- Ramping up, i.e., using pilot projects to monitor various aspects of logistics, compliance and the utility of messages and techniques, is a valuable tool on the road to complete, mandatory recycling and bans in sectors.
- Encouraging backyard composting by households in rural areas is perhaps the best way to overcome cost and feasibility problems with roadside collection; establishment of smaller, local composting sites is another potential solution.
- Keeping organic materials out of landfills reduces costs for communities, since it comprises an average of about 25 percent of waste volume but a much higher proportion of weight. Since disposal costs are usually determined by tonnage, taking organic materials out of the waste stream saves money.

- Placed in a landfill, organic materials produce methane (CH₄) gas, a greenhouse gas exponentially more powerful than CO₂.
- Landfill space is a very valuable component of our solid-waste disposal system. Any reduction in the waste stream helps to save landfill space.
- Food residuals when composted or processed through anaerobic digestion produce fuel as well as valuable organic soil amendments and fertilizers.
- Food-waste recycling, like all forms of recycling, needs to adhere to the pyramid that places reduction as the first strategy.
- There is a great and ongoing need for public education urging people (and farms, institutions and food stores) to plant, purchase or donate perishable food carefully, planning so that as much of the food as possible is actually eaten. Surplus food should be donated for human consumption as quickly as possible; food not deemed eligible for consumption by humans should be consumed by animals. After that, food should be used for soil amendment (composted) or energy (anaerobic digestion or combustion) production. It should not be landfilled.
- There may be a need for ancillary regulation of the use of by-products, such as a requirement that government- or corporate-owned properties over a certain size use composted products in place of chemical fertilizers.

We have attempted to chronicle the experiences of Northeastern communities of various sizes and with recycling systems of different types in order to provide a spectrum of information about what works and what doesn't. We've interviewed politicians, waste professionals, municipal government officials, and private citizen activists in order to gain a variety of perspectives. However, it's important to remember that none of these individuals has all the qualifications of living or working in a Northeast city or town with mandatory, curbside food-scrap collection.

Please find the five stories on food collection programs by visiting:
<https://grassrootsfund.org/stories/feature-stories>