

FOOD WASTE AND RECOVERY

Project Summary

Tompkins Food Future is a community food system planning initiative aimed at creating the first-ever comprehensive food system plan for Tompkins County. The goal is to create a more sustainable, equitable, affordable, and healthy food system for all members of our community. What follows is a summary of what's been learned about the state of our local food system through community conversations, in-depth interviews, focus groups, surveys, neighborhood canvassing, and data collection. This section covers **Food Waste and Recovery**.

Introduction

National studies show that an estimated 30–40% of all food produced (~130 billion pounds) is never eaten. At the same time, upwards of 40 million Americans struggle with food insecurity. Why is it that nearly half of America's food goes to waste when so many people struggle to have enough nutritious food to eat? Wasted food is a missed opportunity to feed the millions of Americans who struggle with food insecurity. Food is the single largest component of solid waste in landfill and incinerators—and a major source of the greenhouse gas methane. Farmers, retailers, and restaurants miss opportunities to profit when food is wasted.

Food waste occurs throughout the food system for various reasons:

Before Harvest

Crops are lost due to pests, drought, or bad weather; a shortage of farmworkers to harvest; or a surplus without a market.

After Harvest

Produce is discarded because it doesn't meet consumer expectations (size, color, shape, quality).

Processing

Edible parts like skins, peels, and fat are discarded.

TOMPKINS COUNTY FOOD WASTE & RECOVERY AT-A-GLANCE

Wasting food is a misuse of valuable resources. Food is the single largest component of solid waste in landfill and incinerators - and a major source of the greenhouse gas methane.

3,384,900

LBS OF FOOD WASTE COMPOSTED BY CAYUGA COMPOST

120,372

LBS OF RESIDENTIAL FOOD SCRAPS COLLECTED



AN ESTIMATED 35% OF ALL FOOD PRODUCED IS NEVER EATEN.

1,400

LBS OF FOOD SAVED PER DAY BY FDN

14

FOOD SCRAP DROP SITES IN TOMPKINS

UNEATEN FOOD IS RESPONSIBLE FOR 4% OF US GHG EMISSIONS



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Consumers

Food is wasted at home when consumers buy more than is needed, forget food in the fridge, or discard food that is past expiration but otherwise edible.

Restaurants

Serve large portions that often can't be finished in one sitting, and discard menu items past their prime.

Retail

Grocery stores often keep shelves fully stocked for appearances, even if that means food spoils before it can be sold. Stores also discard food that is past its "sell by" date, even when food is edible.

In this section, we explore current food waste reduction and recovery initiatives in Tompkins County, the barriers we face, and the opportunities available to expand these efforts and implement new strategies.

Current Initiatives

Tompkins County Department of Recycling and Materials Management (TCRMM)

has been implementing waste diversion programs for the past 35 years. TCRMM supports residents, businesses, schools, events, and organizations through various composting methods including home composting education and residential food scrap drop spots throughout the County.

Cornell Cooperative Extension of Tompkins County and TCRMM offer home composting education to residents in Tompkins County. The Compost Education Program engages in public outreach and education to increase public awareness of composting and the range of options available for reducing food waste.

Friendship Donations Network (FDN) rescues fresh, nutritious food that would otherwise be thrown away from stores, farms, and colleges and redistributes it to neighbors facing food insecurity throughout Tompkins County and beyond. FDN recovers unused food from dozens of [donors](#) and provides food donations to 50-plus distribution partners including free meal programs, food pantries, low-income housing communities, community organizations, and grassroots organizations.

Challenges

Access to food scrap drop spots can be difficult for people without bike or car transportation, especially those who live in low-income neighborhoods.

Lack of small- to medium-sized collectors and community composting sites limit composting options for residents and businesses.

Contamination, especially at events, public locations, and the front end of restaurants, is a challenge and requires education and facilitation to promote quality control.

Funding isn't sufficient to expand all aspects of food reduction and recovery, including wasted food prevention, small and moderate food scrap collectors, and processors.

Curbside food scrap collection is not currently available in any municipality, despite a successful, since-concluded pilot program in the City of Ithaca.

People hold misconceptions and need education and training related to composting. People often do not see the direct benefit, have had negative experiences due to incorrect practices, or simply do not know how to compost.

Having the space to compost outdoors is a challenge for many residents—particularly those who rent in the City of Ithaca (70% of the population).

Businesses are concerned about liability and food safety. Citing these fears, they refuse to donate all of the edible, yet unsalable food and instead opt for that food to be wasted, either ending up in the landfill, or in some cases composted.

Opportunities

The following opportunities to expand existing food waste reduction and composting efforts have been identified by TCRMM.

Expand drop spots and education to communities that have not been well-served thus far. This work will include assistance to new neighborhoods including “food scrap pop-drops” at places of work, apartments, mobile home parks, and both private and public spaces.

Work with the City of Ithaca and Cayuga Heights to include weekly curbside food scrap collection as part of residential trash pickup services.

Expand non-residential wasted food prevention tools such as “Lean Path” and food waste collection programs to more food service establishments (schools, nursing homes, grocery stores, and restaurants).

Expand existing efforts and build new relationships to increase the processing of food scraps into valuable compost and soil blends, to encourage businesses to use vermiculture and other composting techniques, and expand marketing of finished compost.

Leverage the forthcoming NYS FOOD Donation Law which bans food waste from large generators and will require businesses to donate edible food. Businesses must be supported in reducing surplus food from the source. Education is needed to prevent food rescue organizations and food distribution programs from bearing the burden of the excess food produced by businesses.

Support the proposed Federal Zero Food Waste Act to provide grant funding for the implementation of food waste measurement and prevention for small businesses as well as supporting the **Federal Composting Act** to fund infrastructure including food scrap collection and processing.

Promote local awareness of existing federal and state Good Samaritan laws which protect donors of edible food products.

Encourage home composting by implementing a “pay-as you-throw” fee structure similar to trash collection, which incentivizes residents to divert food waste from their personal waste stream.