



# Food Waste and Recovery

## Food System Baseline Assessment

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Cover image: RJ Anderson

COMPOST

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## Introduction

National studies show that an estimated 30-40% of all food produced in the US (about 130 billion pounds) is never eaten. At the same time, upwards of 40 million Americans struggle with food insecurity. Combined with obesity rates of 30%, this “American food paradox” highlights the need for change. 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? Wasting food is a misuse of valuable human and natural resources. 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 and livestock products are lost due to pests, disease, droughts or bad weather, a shortage of farmworkers to harvest, or a surplus that doesn’t meet demand.

### **After Harvest**

Food products are discarded because they don’t meet consumer expectations (size, color, shape, etc.).

### **Processing**

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

### **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**

Food service establishments often serve large portions that can’t be finished in one sitting or prepare more food than will be ordered.

### **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 “sell by” date even when food is edible.

## Tompkins County Food Waste and Recovery at-a-Glance

### 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

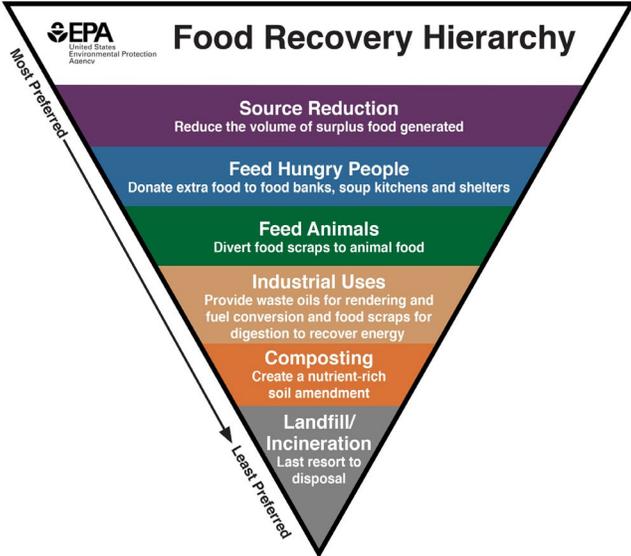
UNEATEN FOOD IS RESPONSIBLE FOR 4% OF US GHG EMISSIONS



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# Food Recovery Hierarchy

The US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has established a Food Recovery Hierarchy which outlines the best use cases for potentially wasted food in order of greatest benefit for the environment, society, and economy. The Hierarchy prioritizes source reduction, followed by feeding hungry people, feeding animals, industrial uses, composting, and landfill/incineration.



*The US EPA Food Recovery Hierarchy provides a framework for how to best address potentially wasted food.*

## Current Initiatives-Tompkins County Recycling and Materials Management

The Tompkins County Department of Recycling & Materials Management (TCRMM) has been implementing waste diversion programs for the past 35 years in ways that are environmentally sound, cost effective, socially responsible, and safe. TCRMM has been a leader in normalizing composting and food waste reduction through education, technical assistance and operations that include partnerships with the private and non-profit sectors. The Department supports residents, businesses, schools, events, and organizations through various composting methods including home composting education and residential food scrap drop spots throughout the County. Businesses can arrange for pickup of food scraps through dedicated collectors. The food scraps are composted through a public-private partnership with Cayuga Compost, a local windrow-style composting facility. The end product is sold as a valuable soil amendment.

### Food Scraps Recycling Program



*A resident and attendant at the Food Scraps Recycling Drop Spot located in Groton.*

TCRMM has been diverting food waste through the Food Scraps Recycling Drop Spot program since 2011. With this model, residents can participate in food scrap diversion by collecting their wasted food and bringing it to a Drop Spot location. As of 2021, there are 16 locations open weekly throughout Tompkins County. Residents are provided free toolkits

which include a one-gallon kitchen caddy, compostable liners, and educational materials. Food scraps collected through this program are transferred to Cayuga Compost, located in Trumansburg. 635 tons were diverted through the program in 2021. In preparing for growth in food scraps recycling, TCRMM used funding from a New York State Department of Environmental Conservation (DEC) Climate Smart Communities grant to add a food scraps tip floor to the Recycling and Solid Waste Center. The new building enables more efficient transfer and transportation of food scraps to composting facilities.

The Department has also been working on a grant-funded project through the NYS DEC to implement food waste prevention, donation, and recycling projects at three apartment complexes in Tompkins County. The title of the grant project is Advancing Food Waste Prevention, Donation and Recycling in Apartments.

Looking forward, TCRMM plans to continue growing this program by expanding the number of Drop Spots, with an emphasis on reaching underserved communities.



*A resident dumping food scraps at the Food Scraps Recycling Drop Spot located at Cornell Cooperative Extension of Tompkins County.*

### **Food Waste Prevention Education**

Following the US EPA Food Recovery Hierarchy, TCRMM has worked to promote the topic of food waste prevention. In 2015, the Department conducted a Pollution Prevention Institute-funded food waste prevention project using the US EPA Food is Too Good to Waste and Save the Food campaigns. Outcomes of the project included a food waste prevention challenge for users of the Drop Spots, a film screening, and the production of a

short educational video. The Department's social media accounts, newsletters, and website continue to promote food waste prevention as a regular topic.

Food waste prevention is also a component of the Advancing Food Waste Prevention, Donation and Recycling in Apartments grant project. TCRMM partnered with Cornell Cooperative Extension in 2021 to offer food waste prevention cooking classes at the partnering apartment complexes. Topics covered include smart shopping, smart storage, and smart cooking methods, which are also included in a Smart Food Waste Prevention informational brochure available to the public.

### **Barriers to Participation**

TCRMM recognizes that more can be done to improve access and convenience for food scrap recycling participants. People without convenient transportation or the availability to visit a Drop Spot during hours of operation are less likely to be able to participate.

There is a lack of small- to medium-sized collectors and community composting sites. Residents and small businesses and organizations could benefit from more options.

Contamination presents a challenge even with education, particularly at events, public locations, and for customer use at restaurants. Adequate signage and food scrap facilitators are necessary to prevent trash and recyclables from entering the food scraps stream.

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.

A pilot program for residential curbside collection of food scraps was conducted from 2014 to 2016. After the pilot was successfully completed the City of Ithaca wasn't ready to continue providing this service on a municipal level.

## Current Initiatives-Compost Education Program

In 1991, Tompkins County Recycling and Materials Management (TCRMM) and Cornell Cooperative Extension – Tompkins County (CCETC) began their long-time partnership to offer home composting education to residents in Tompkins County. The overall goal of the Program is for Tompkins County residents to compost organic food and yard waste as part of a multi-faceted, solid waste management strategy that is easy, cost effective, and environmentally and socially responsible. In so doing, the Compost Education Program supports the goal of TCRMM to divert compostable materials from the waste stream and thereby maximize waste reduction 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. Delivery methods include: public classes; workshops for interested groups; displays and demonstrations; distribution of informational brochures, educational videos and promotional materials; the website, articles and social media; technical advice via the “Rotline”; and the maintenance of compost demonstration sites.



*The compost demonstration site, located at CCETC, 615 Willow Ave.*

Tompkins County Master Composters are recruited, trained and supported to expand the Program’s outreach throughout the County. Every spring, the Program trains new Master Composters, who work alongside previously-trained volunteers. Part of the training program is a “practical internship” where trainees plan events (i.e. the Compost Fair), or create an Independent Outreach Project in the community. Throughout the year, Master Composters engage in many forms of education with the Program.

Program staff (paid and volunteer) engage with residential groups that wish to compost. Technical assistance and educational support for onsite composting is provided when appropriate. The Compost Education Program also maintains three Compost Learning Collaborative sites in partnership with community gardens in Ithaca, Freeville and Groton. Residents who garden at these locations, or live nearby, can contribute their food scraps and learn best composting practices.

The Compost Education Program educates youth about how composting benefits the earth and impacts waste reduction. Master Composters teach composting principles to youth in both classroom and non-formal settings. They also assist classroom educators to set up onsite compost systems for educational purposes.



*A Tompkins County Master Composter talking to attendees at the Grassroots Festival of Music and Dance.*

## **Barriers to Home Composting**

There are several barriers that prevent Tompkins County residents from composting at home. Perhaps the biggest barrier is not seeing direct benefits to their lives. People will say, "I don't have time" or "I have no need for compost."

Misconceptions about home composting abound. Some people have had bad experiences; they, or someone they know, has composted in an incorrect manner and had problems (i.e. odor, pests). AS a result, they may have a fear of creating problems for themselves or their neighbors, landlord, etc.

Taking the time to (1) learn how to compost, (2) set up a compost, and (3) maintain compost can be a barrier to some, especially when they have not done it before. It requires an investment of both the time, and also some money/resources, to get up and running.

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). Some renters want to compost at home, but their landlord prohibits the practice. While it is possible to compost food scraps indoors using a worm bin, double-can, commercial unit, or bokashi system, this usually requires a higher commitment and investment of time, money, or both.

People who don't garden, or maintain a yard, may have no need for finished compost. Some people wonder what to do with any compost that they do create.

## Current Initiatives-Friendship Donations Network

Food recovery in Tompkins County is handled primarily by Friendship Donations Network (FDN), a food rescue organization located in Ithaca. The FDN mission is to rescue fresh, nutritious food that would otherwise be wasted and redistribute it to people facing food insecurity throughout Tompkins County and in nearby communities outside of Tompkins County. FDN was founded in 1988 by Ithaca resident Sara Pines and continues to operate 7 days/week, 364 days/year (every day except December 25th when businesses are closed) as a primarily volunteer-run organization coordinated by one part-time employee.

FDN partners with local businesses and residents to prevent good food from being wasted. FDN has scheduled daily pickups from about a dozen food donor businesses and is “on call” 7 days/week to receive donations from other businesses as needed. Regular food donors include grocery stores, bakeries, colleges, food producers and distributors, and more. There are significant quantities of seasonal donations with fresh local produce from farms, farmers markets, Community Supported Agriculture models, and home gardeners. For a listing of FDN’s food donor partners, visit: <https://friendshipdonations.org/donors/>.



*FDN volunteers pick up donations of fresh produce each week from the Ithaca Farmers Market.*

The majority of donations that FDN handles are fresh, perishable foods including fruits and vegetables, dairy products, prepared foods, bakery products, and eggs and other proteins, totalling more than 1,500 pounds of food rescued every day. This food is entirely usable even though it may at times be deemed unsaleable by the donor business. The model of just-in-time food rescue enables FDN to rescue highly perishable foods because the majority of donations are transported directly from the donor site to the distribution site

and are distributed within hours of being donated. FDN has a facility located in the Just Be Cause Not-for-Profit Development Center in Ithaca where food can be stored temporarily. There is a CoolBot® (energy efficient alternative to a commercial walk-in cooler), freezers, and space for shelf stable items, all of which benefit partners that don't have their own storage space. Food can be stored until it is ready to be distributed. The storage facility also allows FDN food distribution partners to select only the items that they know they'll be able to distribute, thereby minimizing the likelihood of wasted food at distribution sites.

FDN coordinates with a diverse network of food distribution partners which allows food to be distributed in an efficient and equitable way, reaching more than 2,000 people every week. A full listing of FDN food distribution partners is posted at <https://friendshipdonations.org/programs/>.

Partners include:

- Meal programs,
- Food pantries or free grocery programs,
- Community organizations that make food available to clients they work with and,
- Grassroots level distribution (often relationship-based distributions, like home deliveries and Mutual Aid programs), which helps to bridge the gaps and reach people who are not able to access some of the other services.

As a dedicated food rescue organization, FDN serves as a reliable point of contact for food donors that want to donate their surplus food rather than risk it being wasted. Businesses rely on FDN to handle the coordination of where the food will be distributed. They don't have to worry about the schedules of various recipients or limitations about what type/quantity of food the recipient organizations are able to handle. Food donors contact FDN as a consistent, single point of contact and know that the food donations will be collected reliably and distributed efficiently where they are needed most.

The nature of food rescue is relatively unpredictable, and as such FDN coordinates with food distribution partners in a mutually beneficial way. Some partners are scheduled to distribute food on specific days while others are available to distribute food as needed when surplus food is available. With the primary focus on preventing good food from being wasted, FDN is able to assist food distribution partners in reducing the amount of wasted food through their programs as well. With close communication and solid relationships, food donations are matched with partners throughout the community. Hunger-relief programs are often volunteer-run and operating at capacity with their own mission of distributing food. FDN volunteers support food distribution partners by picking up and

delivering food when needed. Food rescue organizations like FDN can help prevent those programs from being overburdened by donations by offering an outlet for the redistribution of food that is still good, but not able to be distributed by one partner, it has another opportunity to be matched with another partner.

FDN demonstrates the power of a decentralized network. FDN aims to support the efforts that people and programs offer to help connect food with people, and to minimize the bureaucracy that can too often get in the way of the sharing of food and other resources – coordinating the distribution of food rather than controlling it. FDN recognizes that trust and relationships are an essential part of successful food rescue and distribution and aims to prioritize this in operations. FDN serves a vital role in providing healthy food to people facing food insecurity, while helping our community reduce the amount of usable food being wasted.

View FDN's Food Waste Infographic: [friendshipdonations.org/food-waste-infographic/](https://friendshipdonations.org/food-waste-infographic/)

### **Barriers to Food Donation**

Friendship Donations Network has been partnering with local businesses since 1988 to reduce the amount of unsaleable, yet edible food from being wasted. For many, food donation and food waste reduction is common sense and a wise business decision, a win-win. Businesses receive a tax deduction, avoid costs of hauling waste, and enjoy the positive PR associated with benefiting their community by providing food donations. However, despite the existence of the Bill Emerson Good Samaritan Food Donation Act (the federal law that provides protection from liability to those who donate food) some businesses refuse to donate all of their edible yet unsalable food and instead opt to send food to the landfill or compost. They cite fear of liability or concern about food safety as the reason items cannot be donated.

The US culture and our society's high level of concern with food safety plays a role in the barrier to food donation. In contrast, food waste expert Dana Gunders cites the UK cultural perspective that ranks "food waste as a higher concern than food safety."

Misinformation related to [date labels on food](#) is another contributing factor to wasted food. FDN provides information and education to community members and encourages people to trust their senses to determine if food is edible rather than relying on the sell-by or best-by dates that food manufacturers place on their products.

Some of the rescued food that FDN receives and distributes appears no different than food that one would purchase. Other times food is donated due to its damaged or imperfect appearance, even if there is no effect on the taste or nutritional value. This type of donation would be ideal for processing or preserving in a kitchen facility.



*FDN picks up food donations every day from Wegmans (shown in photo) and other local businesses.*

## Current Initiatives-Zero Waste Ithaca

Zero Waste Ithaca (ZWI) is a grassroots community group of waste reduction enthusiasts supporting the journey to sustainable, zero waste living. Its mission is to promote zero waste culture and policies. In addition to promoting zero waste practices among individuals, Zero Waste Ithaca works toward making Tompkins County a [Zero Waste Municipality](#). In addition to promoting zero waste practices Toward the goal, ZWI currently focuses on the following initiatives:

- Discouraging single-use containers by promoting and normalizing the practice of BYOC (Bring Your Own Container) as a new cultural norm
- Working to bring true glass recycling to Ithaca / Tompkins County

- Educating the public and stakeholders through webinars, programs, film gatherings, and the forthcoming website: [zerowasteithaca.org](http://zerowasteithaca.org) offering more details.
- Community events including trash pickups, Buy Nothing gift economy groups, food bulk buying clubs, zero waste potlucks, clothing swaps, regular meetings, and attending co-op and county meetings

## Summary of 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).

## Opportunities for Future Progress

Numerous opportunities have been identified to expand existing food waste reduction and composting efforts and develop new initiatives in the near and long-term future. These will be detailed in the upcoming Local Solid Waste Management Plan as required by the NYS Department of Environmental Conservation. Forthcoming initiatives pertain to the residential and non-residential sectors (i.e. single-family and multi-family residents, businesses, organizations and educational institutions) with a focus on waste prevention and composting.

## **Opportunities to Prevent Food Waste**

Residential waste prevention initiatives will expand upon the previous pilot program using the national Food is Too Good to Waste campaign materials established by the US EPA. Educating residents about smart shopping, prep, and storage creates opportunities for food waste reduction at multiple levels of the food waste hierarchy.

Existing non-residential wasted food prevention tools such as Leanpath and a food waste collection program will be expanded to more food service establishments (schools, nursing homes, grocery stores and restaurants) and the successful “ReBusiness Partners” waste assessments will expand. Local businesses could reduce the amount of wasted food before it is donated by using a program like [Too Good To Go](#), a mobile application that connects customers to restaurants and stores that have unsold food surplus.

## **Opportunities to Increase Food Donation**

The NYS Food Donation Law (read more about this in the section below about policy) has the potential to shift the dynamic between businesses and food rescue organizations such as Friendship Donations Network. Until now, FDN has been in the position of convincing businesses to donate rather than discard their unsalable edible food. With the law in place, some businesses will be mandated to do so. In order for this legislation to be most effective in reducing wasted food, businesses must be reminded that the first level of the EPA Food Recovery Hierarchy is Source Reduction, ie. reducing surplus food from the source. There is a need for education and a culture shift to reframe the concept of “virtuous donating” to prevent food rescue organizations and the network of food distribution programs from bearing the burden of the excess food produced by businesses.

Friendship Donations Network and the local network of food distribution partners sometimes face the challenge of overabundance when donated food is beyond the capacity of the distribution outlets. A community kitchen would be useful to process and/or preserve food that is near the end of its usable life to create more desirable and useful donations. A public free market is one example of an outlet for secondary-level food rescue (“rescuing rescued food”) to offer surplus donations to community members outside of the existing free food resources.

## **Opportunities to Grow Food Scraps Recycling**

The County plans to 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. The new locations would require staffing to prevent contamination.

TCRMM intends to work with two municipalities that perform weekly residential trash collection (City of Ithaca and Cayuga Heights) to evaluate the feasibility of implementing weekly curbside food scrap collection and possibly every other week trash collection. This would build upon the successful curbside food scrap pilot program conducted in 2014-2016. TCRMM will also identify entrepreneurs that can collect residential food scraps on a small-scale neighborhood basis using small trucks and bicycles. These approaches have been successfully conducted in other sustainable communities.

The NYS [Food Donation and Food Scraps Recycling Law](#) will require more businesses and organizations to recycle food scraps. There are currently five Designated Food Scrap Generators in Tompkins County that are required to recycle food scraps. The food scraps tip floor at the Recycling and Solid Waste Center can be utilized by haulers and self-hauling businesses and organizations for efficient transfer to Cayuga Compost. TCRMM will also encourage the DEC to adopt a more aggressive policy to ban food waste from small to moderate-sized generators as well as including a requirement for residents to participate in curbside or drop spot food scrap collection.

Additional community composting sites will be added in partnership with Cooperative Extension’s Master Composters program.

The Compost Education Program will continue to reach increasingly more residents about the benefits of home composting. The Master Composter model, where each volunteer has their own network of friends, co-workers, etc., is quite effective for reaching deeper into the community. Once knowledgeable, motivated and empowered, Master Composters can teach a diverse segment of the population about composting and help them to do it.

Given the current interests and concerns of people in the County, the Compost Education Program could focus more on the environmental benefits of composting. Being able to quantify how home composting reduces greenhouse gas emissions could both help motivate people to compost, and contribute to climate goals adopted by the City, County and State.



*A member of the Compost Learning Collaborative site at the Freeville Community Garden managing compost in the bins.*

Food scraps will continue to be processed into valuable compost and soil blends through the County's public-private partnership with Cayuga Compost. New relationships will be established with other local businesses to use vermiculture (composting with worms) and other innovative techniques. Marketing of finished compost will also be expanded. Relationships with emerging food waste collectors and community partners will be a focus.



*A Windrow Compost Turner is used to accelerate the composting process at Cayuga Compost.*



*Aerial view of Cayuga Compost's operation in Trumansburg.*

### **Policies to Increase Food Waste Reduction and Recovery**

Effective January 1st, 2022 large generators of excess food – organizations that generate more than 2 tons of wasted food and food scraps per week – are now required to comply with the NYS [Food Donation and Food Scraps Recycling Law](#). Included are restaurants, grocery stores, hotels & motels, colleges & universities, malls, event centers, etc.

Generators of excess food are now required to:

1. Separate and donate edible food,
2. Separate and recycle all remaining food scraps if within 25 miles of an organics recycler.

Source: <https://feedingnys.org/food-donation-and-food-scrap-recycling-law/>

There are nine businesses in Tompkins County that are required to separate and donate edible food. FDN is already partnering with most of these businesses to collect food donations, and many more that are not affected by this policy. Tompkins County could enhance this legislation by requiring all businesses, institutions, and events that take place in Tompkins County to donate edible food, thereby prioritizing food waste reduction locally.

TCRMM will recommend that the County legislature 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, with priority given to small entrepreneurs in low income and minority communities.

The City of Ithaca and Tompkins County are currently very supportive of onsite composting. Policies that enable residents to responsibly compost should be maintained.

## Summary of Opportunities

**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.

## Conclusion

Tompkins County and its partners have laid the groundwork to make significant strides in implementing the Food Recovery Hierarchy and addressing the problem of wasted food. Further progress will require education, partnerships, legislation, and infrastructure at various levels.

The Local Solid Waste Management Plan (LSWMP) for Tompkins County, which will be updated in 2022, will set forth implementation steps to reduce waste over a 10-year period. Development of the LSWMP will include a process for public input, and the plan will seek to address many of the goals listed in this document.