

Food Waste Diversion at Special Events

Introduction

Diverting leftover food and food scraps at special events such as fairs, conferences, sporting events, and trade shows can be a great opportunity to reduce waste handling and disposal costs. Early coordination between event staff, suppliers, food preparation staff, waste haulers, food banks, and composters is critical to a successful effort. Below you will find suggestions and strategies for starting up or improving a food diversion program at your special events.

Considerations

How Does a Food Diversion Program Work?

Below are three main types of food scraps:

- Unserved, edible food.
- Kitchen preparation scraps.
- Postconsumer plate scrapings.

Three main uses for collected food are:

- Food bank or charity kitchen.
- Compost.
- Animal feed.

Do You Have Staff Dedicated to Overseeing a Food Diversion Project?

Food collection requires that chefs set aside reusable food for charity collection. Staff members need to locate, monitor, and service collection bins consistently throughout the event.

Contamination with non-compostable items, especially glass, is the most frequent cause of load rejection by farm and compost processors. Event staff should routinely check for bin contamination and overflow problems and relocate bins if necessary. Staff must also post educational signs for patrons and train vendors to separate their food trimmings.

What Types of Food Operations Will Be Involved?

For catered events, menu design will affect the amount and type of leftovers. Buffets generally produce larger amounts of reusable leftovers than individually served meals. Unserved buffet trays of food can be donated to food rescue organizations if this service is available in your area. Unfortunately, buffets also tend to have more postconsumer leftovers.

Once placed in front of patrons, food cannot legally be re-served, though it can be used for compost or animal feed. Catered events offer greater opportunity to control the flow of food scraps, since only one food service provider is involved.

Therefore, your choice of caterer is critical to the success of your food diversion efforts. Ask potential caterers about their willingness to separate pre- and postconsumer food scraps and ask if they can provide reusable dishware.

Preconsumer food scraps may include food processing wastes such as vegetable culls, brewery by-products, coffee grounds, or kitchen preparation wastes. Restaurants, for example, often cut off inedible portions of vegetables in food preparation. This can include carrot tops, potato peels, lettuce leaves, broccoli stems, or similar scraps.

Postconsumer food scraps is food that has been served to diners but is not eaten; also called plate scrapings. This may include vegetables, salad dressings, sauces, cheese, meat, and bones, as well as nonfood items, such as napkins. If the nonfood items are not separated from the food, these and other nonfood contaminants like straws, cups, and plastic utensils will become a part of this blend.

Contracts with food service providers can dictate the type of food waste to be generated as well as the recyclability of packaging and service ware. Work with your food service contractors early on

Food Scrap Management

to control the types of compostable materials, recyclables, and potential contaminants.

For fairs, festivals, and sporting events with multiple food vendors, working with vendors ahead of time is particularly important to maximize the amount of recyclable and compostable materials and minimize materials that may end up in the trash. An effective way to achieve this is to include contract language that requires recyclable and compostable food service ware. The contract should require the vendors to separate recyclable and compostable materials used behind the counter. By making this part of the contract, a level playing field is created for service providers bidding on the contract, and bidders know what to expect.

What Type of Food Will Be Collected?

Collecting pre-consumer food scraps for diversion is relatively simple since the number of staff to educate and coordinate is small. Non-contaminated kitchen prep trimmings, such as cornhusks, lettuce, and onion culls, may be suitable for composters that can accept agricultural residuals or licensed animal feed operations.

Collecting postconsumer food scraps will increase the total volume of scraps. However, this may also limit the options for depositing these scraps, increase the potential for contamination, and widen the target group for education. Training patrons to separate scraps can be difficult due to the distractions of the event and the transient population.

Collection Bins

Cross-contamination refers to contaminating food waste with unacceptable materials such as glass and plastic is a very common cause of load rejection by composters. To minimize contamination, be sure compostable material collection bins are well labeled, with graphics and appropriate translation for non-English speaking users.

Kitchen prep collection bins should be located for easy access by staff or they won't be used. Consider placing a small container on the prep

table itself that can be dumped as needed into a larger container at the end of the table.

If postconsumer food is to be collected by staff, a separate area should be set up for postconsumer food waste bins so as not to contaminate the kitchen. Place a food collection bin beside the busing table and instruct staff about acceptable organic materials.

If patrons are to separate food, then bins should also be placed where food is purchased or served, but more importantly where food is consumed.

Collection of compostable materials may have more success and less contamination if using compostable products instead of asking patrons to separate food from non-compostable products, such as foam or plastic plates, cups, and utensils.

Always place garbage and food collection bins next to each other with good signage. Bin shape, size, and color can all be used to differentiate the bins. The bins should look different enough so the user instantly recognizes a difference.

How Many Meals Will Be Served? How Many Attendees Are Expected? How Often Will Collection Containers Be Emptied?

This information will help estimate the number of collection containers needed. Annual or ongoing event planners should have access to useful data from past events. A one-day event for fewer than 200 people with only lunch and snacks may not produce enough scraps for commercial collection.

What Type of Food Service Tableware Will Be Used?

Food service ware may not be needed at all. Catered events may choose to serve "finger foods" or use food in compostable food wrappers or on napkins as a waste prevention measure. Using washable kitchenware and tableware will also significantly reduce the volume of disposed materials.

Some caterers may request a fee for the additional handling of reusable dishware, so be prepared to negotiate a price. In some casual situations it may be appropriate to encourage patrons to bring their own cups, plates, and utensils when possible.

Food Scrap Management

If reusable tableware items cannot be obtained, the use of compostable food service ware will increase the volume of materials to be collected for composting and decrease contamination and trash volumes. This will also reduce potential problems of contamination during source separation.

Some composters have the ability to screen out small amounts of plastics in their processing, but all composters prefer a clean organic material.

What Type of Food Scraps and Collection Bags Will Food Waste Processors Accept?

Check with the compost facility and ask them which materials they will accept. Vegetarian meals or fruit and vegetable waste with small amounts of meat or cheese mixed in may be accepted by the compost facility.

Products such as cheeses, sauces, meat scraps, or even coated paper products are compostable, but the compost facility might not want these in their mix.

Collection bin liner bags can help improve bin cleanliness and reduce residual odors, but if they are made of non-compostable plastic, ask if the compost operator can handle them.

If compostable bags or food service ware are to be used, before purchasing be sure that the type you select is acceptable to the compost facility. Also, consider if the compostable bags are visually distinct. Even if they are compostable, they may not be acceptable if the composter cannot tell them apart from plastic bags.

Does Your Event Produce Large Amounts of Meat and Grease that Can Be Rendered?

Since excess meat can be problematic for some composters, consider having meat, bone, grease, and oils collected by a rendering service.

Can Some of the Food Be Donated?

Food that is still suitable for human consumption and has not been served should be fed to needy people. If you anticipate vendors having leftover food that is still edible, ask a local food bank or food rescue program ahead of time to arrange for pickup. Be sure you follow all handling and storage requirements for donated food.

Who Will Transport the Food?

Don't forget transportation. Hauling can be as simple as using a small pickup truck. For large events, you may need a hauler to pick up bins, or a box van or refrigerated truck for edible foods. The end processor, whether it is a food bank, composter or hog farm, can often provide or arrange this service for you.

Additional Tips

During initial planning, emphasize California's waste reduction goals with event coordinators, sponsors, and administration. Let them know that your food diversion efforts complete the recycling ethic of separating other commodities such as cans and bottles.

You may encounter additional costs for compostable products and recycled-content products, transportation, or miscellaneous surcharges; however, reduced disposal costs may partially or fully offset those expenses.

Visit these free websites for more information:

- [Food Scrap Management](#)
- [Recycled Content Products \(RCP\) Directory](#)
- [Beverage Container-Recycling Centers](#)
- [Food Banks](#)
- [Venues and Special Events](#)
- [City or County Local Government Recycling Coordinator](#)
- [Recycled Material Haulers and Buyers](#)
- [Compost Facilities](#)

Food Scrap Management

Join Governor Schwarzenegger to Keep California Rolling. Every Californian can help to reduce energy and fuel consumption. For a list of simple ways you can reduce demand and cut your energy and fuel costs, Flex Your Power and visit www.fypower.com/.