

Working from the Top: Creative Ways to Reduce Food Waste in Businesses and Institutions

The goal of this session was to inform institutional food scrap generators (dining halls, cafeterias, etc..) on the resources and strategies for reducing food that is wasted. Attendees ranged from materials management staff, to business owners, students, and product manufacturers. In general, the group was very engaged, and conversation was robust!

PRESENTATIONS

Renee Stearns from the Center for EcoTechnology (CET) kicked off the session with a presentation on their recent work creating a website with resources on diverting wasted food in Vermont (and other northeast states). CET includes information on this topic from the VT Department of Environmental Conservation, and expanded the resources originally created for the MA Department of Environmental Protection to encompass northeast states. If you are looking for assistance with implementing a wasted food diversion program, calculating your food waste, or food donation legal fact sheets, [Wasted Food Solutions](#) is the website for you! CET even offers a hotline to call with any questions about this topic: (888) 254-5525 or email at wastedfood@cetonline.org

Next, **Emily Portman from Sodexo Dining Services** with the University of Vermont (UVM) provided a case study of the dining hall waste reduction practices at this large school. Here are some baseline statistics for comparison:

- Student enrollment- 10,513 undergraduates, 1,542 graduates, and 461 medical students
- 4 buffet dining halls, and 13 retail locations
- ~12,000 meals served on campus every day

The Food Recovery Hierarchy was used as a framework to inform the tactics to reduce wasted food; composting is an easy entry-point for institutions to divert large quantities of food from the landfill, and then processes can be improved to more preferred categories of preventing waste. Specific practices at the dining halls and some retail locations include **source reduction** through LeanPath (staff-facing), trayless dining and pre-plated meals, and consumer-facing education. One dining hall **donates food** to the Chittenden Emergency Food Shelf with the guidance of the Food Recovery Network. Most of the food is **composted** through Green Mountain Compost, and the biggest challenges are with contamination and educating staff and consumers on accepted items. Finally, some **energy recovery** is practiced through fry oil recycling by Smartfuel America.

After a brief stretch break, **Carl Diethelm from the Rutland County Solid Waste District (RCSWD)** presented a case study on Green Mountain College's (GMC) dining hall waste prevention. This case study contrasted vastly in scale with that of UVM dining:

- Student enrollment- <500 undergraduates, <100 graduates (online)
- 1 buffet dining hall and 1 retail location: only 363 students on full meal plan
- ~600 meals served every day

Also using the Food Recovery Hierarchy, composting was again highlighted as the entry point that GMC used to divert food from the landfill. Source reduction is possible through waste audits and regular staff meetings to identify overproduction and repurposing opportunities. Project Clean Plate was implemented for one week to educate consumers about the large quantities they dispose. Food

donation is also done through the Food Recovery Network, where a student-run club packages leftovers to send to a local senior center. A local farmer picks up food scraps to feed to animals, which saves them money. Most of the wasted food is still composted on-site, with plans to develop a certified composting facility as an in-vessel system.

CONCLUSIONS

While composting is a relatively easy project to implement (depending on availability of space, money, and a nearby facility), it can require a lot more money than would be necessary by reducing the amount of food wasted. On both the large and small scale, composting requires the largest direct investment of money, while source reduction takes more effort and time to implement. It is usually worth the time to prevent overproduction because of the money it saves down the line. Food donation also takes time to make sure food is saved and donated safely, and can rely on helpful volunteers to keep a program going. Feeding food scraps to animals is a win-win, as farmers will usually pick up the food and even take on some costs because it saves them money; disposal costs are lessened to the institution this way, and this can divert a lot of food from being wasted!

During the question and answer session, there was some clarification of the practices, and then discussion of behavior change strategies, such as in consumer-facing source-reduction projects. Two resources were brought up: [Community-Based Social Marketing](#), a print and online resource written by Doug McKenzie-Mohr, and the work of Brian Wansink from Cornell University: [Mindless Eating](#). To wrap up the session, four groups brainstormed the different strategies for recovering wasted food, and how to implement these in their institutions or communities.