

RECOMMENDATIONS FROM THE TDEC-SPONSORED ROUNDTABLE MEETING ON FOOD WASTE REDUCTION, RECOVERY, AND DIVERSION IN NASHVILLE

INTRODUCTION

On October 6, 2016, the Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation (TDEC) hosted a roundtable discussion on food waste reduction and diversion in the Nashville-Davidson County Metropolitan Area. The goal of the roundtable was to bring together representatives from the business, industry, non-profit, and government sectors to explore food waste reduction, recovery, and diversion strategies. A major objective of the project was to evaluate the role TDEC can play in this endeavor – such as more purposefully allocating resources to relevant efforts and developing effective organics grant offering criteria. These multi-sector insights were requested to support TDEC’s progress towards achieving Objective 4 of the 2015–2025 Solid Waste and Materials Management Plan (2025 Plan)¹, which aims to increase diversion and reduction of organic waste, and TDEC’s efforts to support U.S. Department of Agriculture and U.S. Environmental Protection Agency food waste reduction goals and initiatives. Participants identified the following eight recommendations as the top strategies for TDEC to address food waste reduction, recovery, and diversion.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Infrastructure.

Lack of infrastructure was the most cited limitation to food waste reduction, recovery, and diversion in Davidson County. Infrastructure limitations identified during the discussion include: access to collection and collection options, transport cost and transport options, lack of marketplaces to exchange organic waste as it relates to food recovery and donation, and limited markets for receiving organic waste. Efforts need to be made to expand food waste reduction, recovery, and diversion infrastructure as well as better support stakeholders engaged in successful food waste reduction initiatives. TDEC has recently promulgated new composting rules based on the US Compost Council standard rules; these rules make permitting easier and reduce limitations on community-based gardens and composting. In 2015, TDEC’s Materials Management Program offered its first ever composting grants to help stimulate infrastructure development in an attempt to divert organic waste from landfills; TDEC awarded 5 grants totaling \$2,486,303.

¹ The 2025 Plan, adopted in April 2015, is TDEC's strategic roadmap containing broad objectives and ideas to reduce disposal and increase recycling in Tennessee.

Recommendation: *TDEC needs to increase efforts to support food waste reduction, recovery, and diversion infrastructure by offering opportunities to support infrastructure development (with mechanisms such as grants, educational materials, incentives, and other available mechanisms). Additionally, TDEC should seek to educate farmers, community gardens, businesses, and other similar stakeholders regarding their avenues to donate recovered food items and/or receive off-site organic material for composting under the newly promulgated regulations.*

2. Education.

All four discussion tables identified the need for increased education on food waste. Suggestions ranged from attempting to increase awareness of the issue with the general public through promotion, formal curriculum in schools, non-traditional means (such as interpretive opportunities, mobile education labs, etc.), to cooking, canning, and other community-based classes. The Natural Resource Defense Council (NRDC) and TDEC have shared success in hosting Nashville based screenings of the documentary “Just Eat It!”. One recent success was a Nashville based screening of the film in partnership with Nashville Metro Government at the Nashville Farmer’s Market, which spurred a group of students in attendance to host their own outreach and screening event at Western Kentucky University.

Recommendation: *TDEC should evaluate opportunities for food waste reduction outreach that supports increased awareness of the issue. Mechanisms such as grants, educational materials, incentives, and other available mechanisms could all be utilized in supporting education centered efforts. One strategy would be to partner with different stakeholder groups, the NRDC, and the Ad Council to co-brand “Save the Food” media assets for awareness. TDEC should also consider developing its own Tennessee-specific educational resources to provide to stakeholders.*

3. Cost.

A general theme heard throughout the discussion was the varying scope in which cost acts as a barrier to food waste reduction, recovery, and diversion. One cost related issue identified was the disparity between landfill disposal costs and the cost of organics diversion alternatives. Landfill disposal costs tend to be significantly cheaper than those of other organics diversion alternatives. Discussion also identified the regulatory and financial burdens on permitting of new and existing food waste diversion operations. Additionally, subsidies, tax incentives, and other possible funding mechanisms were discussed as a cost remedy for businesses and/or infrastructure developers.

Recommendation: *Proposals to support infrastructure expansion, tax incentives for businesses, and a statewide recognition program all support lowering costs for both organics waste diversion, and infrastructure development. With respect to regulatory programs, TDEC does not currently charge an annual maintenance fee to operations which recover 75% of their*

incoming waste stream (this is applicable to anaerobic digesters, composting operations, and other innovative proposals). TDEC should investigate the possibility of tax incentive initiatives for supporting food waste reduction, recovery, and diversion efforts pursued by businesses. As identified in recommendation 5, the state could pair a recognition program with a financial incentive or tax rebate initiative.

4. Directory of Opportunity.

A suggestion heard throughout the meeting, and also echoed in the recently released TDEC Office of Policy and Planning whitepaper on food waste entitled “*Southeastern State Efforts Upstream of Composting and Anaerobic Digestion to Address Wasted Food and Food Waste,*” is that the state needs an online resource that compiles Tennessee-based food waste reduction, recovery, and diversion opportunities. This would be a low cost and low resource intensive mechanism to help increase access to information. In addition, this resource would support recommendation number 2 of this meeting.

Recommendation: *As the state’s environmental agency, TDEC should consider synthesizing food waste reduction, recovery, and diversion opportunities into a single web resource that would help local businesses and communities increase awareness of existing opportunities to reduce and/or divert food waste.*

5. Recognition Program.

The Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Certification is a globally successful green building certification program. Modeling the success of the LEED Certification program, the Illinois Food Scrap Coalition has created a free recognition program that promotes businesses and institutions participating in commercial composting. Certified businesses receive a “*We Compost*” recognition on their website, as well as placarding to proudly display their environmentally-conscious organics management efforts. During the discussion, the creation of a statewide conspicuous food waste management recognition program was proposed.

Recommendation: *TDEC should consider creating, or supporting the creation of, a statewide recognition program for businesses that reduce, recover, and/or divert food waste. By creating a statewide designation for food-waste-conscious businesses, TDEC has the ability to gain buy-in from previously uncommitted businesses by incentivizing them with a distinct recognition. In addition to a recognition program, the state could pair this program with a financial incentive or tax rebate initiative.*

6. Residential Consumer Focused.

Residential consumer-generated food waste constitutes the greatest proportion of the food-waste-based waste stream (~43%). Targeting residential consumers was continuously cited amongst the roundtable discussion groups as a necessity. Opportunities for targeting residential consumers are supported under a number of the previously mentioned recommendations. However, initiatives such as increasing access to backyard composting tools or organics collection would directly result in increased food waste diversion.

Recommendation: *TDEC should investigate community interest and support in mobilizing large scale access to backyard composting and access to residential food waste collection services. Based on the gauged interest of the public, TDEC could work to offer communities backyard composting at a reduced rate; or through a grant program initiate the purchase of backyard composters for a given community or area. In addition, education efforts targeting residential consumers, such as canning classes, would support increased food waste reduction.*

7. Target Schools.

Schools generate a large amount of food waste. Focusing food waste reduction, recovery, and diversion efforts on schools not only allows for food waste diversion through food recovery efforts, but also contributes an experiential educational component that will increase student awareness. In addition, the Governor's Rural Task Force has identified food recovery implementation as a recommended strategy for TDEC to implement in at least three distressed counties.

Recommendation: *TDEC should look for opportunities to partner with schools across the state to support the implementation of food recovery programs. This would support Objective 4 of the 2025 Plan, the Governor's Rural Task Force, and the recommendations made elsewhere in this document. Initiatives geared towards changing school lunch programs, foods that makeup school lunches, and other similar efforts are limited by obligations under The Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act of 2010.*

8. State Steering Committee.

A number of states, local governments, and stakeholder groups across the country have formed steering committees on food waste reduction and diversion. In 2016 the states of Delaware (*Senate Concurrent Resolution 35*) and Maryland (*House Bill 743*) both passed legislation creating formal Organics/Food Waste Task Forces to evaluate the states' respective programs. In the Southeast, a large portion of food waste reduction, recovery, and diversion efforts are being spearheaded by charitable and non-governmental

organizations (NGOs)². Therefore, stakeholder communities invested in reducing food waste include, but are not limited to, a collection of state and local governments, NGOs, private businesses, agriculture, grocery stores, restaurants, and schools.

Recommendation: *In the interest of continuing local, regional and state level collaboration on food waste reduction and diversion initiatives, a state steering committee should be formed to evaluate plans, make recommendations, and involve a wide breadth of stakeholders in the discussion.*

SUMMARY

These recommendations from the TDEC-hosted roundtable discussion on food waste reduction, recovery, and diversion in the Nashville-Davidson County Metropolitan Area represent an immense opportunity for the State to more purposefully focus resources and objectives on effective means of reducing food waste. Recommendations from the meeting, summarized above, range from measures that are already underway, to those which are easily implementable, to long-ranging recommendations that will require policy and financial analysis. All recommendations made in this publication are actively being considered for incorporation into measures that support the implementation of the 2025 Plan. These recommendations are reflective of Nashville-Davidson County stakeholders, therefore it is unlikely that these experiences are entirely applicable to other Tennessee communities, especially rural areas. Additional opportunities exist for TDEC to further investigate strategies for reducing, recovering and diverting food waste in rural communities across Tennessee.

The TDEC Office of Policy and Planning whitepaper on food waste entitled "*Southeastern State Efforts Upstream of Composting and Anaerobic Digestion to Address Wasted Food and Food Waste*" recently synthesized food waste reduction and diversion efforts across the Southeastern states as follows:

"Findings indicate that the majority of wasted food and food waste reduction efforts in Southeastern States are currently being undertaken by non-governmental groups, such as local food banks and charitable organizations, as well as local businesses and institutions of higher education. Within most Southeastern states, efforts to reduce wasted food and food waste are primarily driven at the local community level. There are very few formal wasted food and food waste efforts that are currently being led by state or local government agencies. Rather the majority of state- and local-government level efforts are focused on municipal waste reduction generally, through recycling, composting, and anaerobic digestion, but not necessarily active efforts designed to target reductions in wasted food and food waste in particular. Where state agencies are engaging in wasted

² As identified in the TDEC Office of Policy and Planning whitepaper, "*Southeastern State Efforts Upstream of Composting and Anaerobic Digestion to Address Wasted Food and Food Waste*".

food and food waste reduction, efforts are voluntary and heavily focused on stakeholder education and connecting interested parties with resources (e.g., food manufacturers or farmers with food banks). The few instances in which state agency-led programs do have any emphasis on wasted food and food waste reduction, these programs are financed and/or staffed through existing funding mechanisms. Regardless of sector or implementing entity, most frequent challenges cited by entities engaging in wasted food and food waste reduction efforts include lack of resources and infrastructure to implement robust programs.”

This meeting and subsequent food waste outreach efforts, as well as the whitepaper by the TDEC Office of Policy and Planning, represent a first step towards the State partnering with business, industry, and government with the goals of furthering discussion on food waste reduction and diversion strategies, prioritizing future initiatives so resources can be more purposefully allocated, developing ideas to assist in the development of future organics grant offering criteria, and supporting progress towards achieving Objective 4 of the 2025 Plan.