

Case Study: Vermont's Universal Recycling Law

A Food Donation Perspective

The landscape

In the United States (U.S.), over [10 percent of households](#) lack consistent access to enough food for an active, healthy life. Meanwhile, [an estimated 30-40 percent](#) of the U.S. food supply goes to waste, adding up to [80 million tons](#) of food waste in 2021. Turning to policy solutions, some states and localities have implemented restrictions on landfilling to address waste and the impacts on hunger, health, and the environment.

One policy approach is implementing an organic waste ban, which restricts the amount of food waste that can be disposed of in landfills. Instead, generators of food waste are encouraged to [reduce waste at the source or donate quality food](#) in order to prevent and divert food waste. Donating edible food, instead of disposing of it in a landfill, not only provides more nutritious options to those in need but also reduces [climate-damaging methane](#) emissions produced by food in landfills. Currently, [nine states and Washington D.C.](#) have organic waste bans, with Vermont having one of the strongest policies.

Vermont's policy approach

In 2012, the Vermont Legislature unanimously passed the [Universal Recycling Law](#) (URL), which banned three categories of materials from trash bins: blue bin recyclables, leaf and yard debris, and food scraps. The opportunity for the URL was built on previous waste initiatives and state recycling goals that needed renewed efforts to be met.¹ Collaboration around Vermont's food system was underway in 2012, with the establishment of the Farm to Plate Network, which brings together a variety of stakeholders to implement strategic goals from Vermont's food system plan. These efforts, among others, provided momentum for the URL.² Successful implementation of the law also relied on the convenient collection of food scraps and a robust network of composting sites; infrastructure that had been built out over many years.³

Before the law was implemented, a [waste composition study](#) found that 28 percent of residential municipal solid waste and 18 percent of Industrial/Commercial/Institutional waste consisted of organic materials, including food waste. "If you're going to focus on waste and reducing waste...and having a better recycling goal, you really can't get there without focusing on food," says Josh Kelly, the Solid Waste Program Manager at the Vermont Department of Environmental Conservation.

The URL did just that. It was [implemented in phases](#), focusing first on larger food waste generators and by 2020, applied to any person who generates any amount of food waste. Although the law does not require edible food to be donated, it does establish a hierarchy that [prioritizes donations](#) over other management methods, like composting.

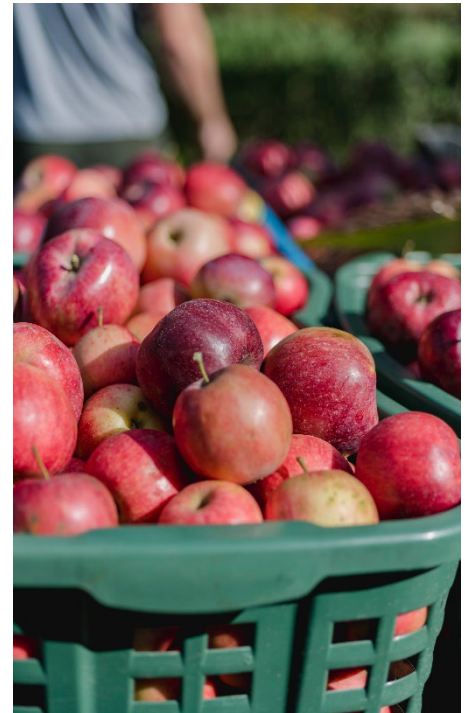


Photo: Joanna Stotowicz/unsplash.com

Supporting nutritious donations

The Vermont Foodbank saw firsthand the impact of the URL. When the first phase of the law went into effect in 2014, the food bank received almost 350,000 pounds of recovered food and by 2018 that number rose to over 2.6 million pounds.⁴ In order to handle the impending increase in donations, the food bank relied on its partnerships. “We empowered our network of agencies of food shelves and meal sites to actually do direct pickups. So that was key in actually being able to implement the needs of the law,” says Kelsey Morley, Director of Operations at the Vermont Foodbank. Food shelves (also known as food pantries), received guidance from the food bank, which supported their ability to accept different kinds of food and turn down donations of unwanted items.⁵

The law not only led to an increase in donations but an increase in variety of healthier options. Food shelves saw items like mangos, leafy greens, and different cuts of meats and their clients took notice.⁶ Some food shelves saw more utilization, which helped to reinforce the importance of having nutritious options available to those experiencing food insecurity.

Impact on retailers

Grocery stores, which [frequently deal with food waste](#), had to shift their practices to comply with the URL. The Vermont Foodbank worked with retailers to educate staff on best practices and used the food recovery hierarchy as a tool to frame conversations. The results: a steep increase in the amount of retail donations.⁷ However, the focus on nutritional quality of donations varied among retailers. Companies like Hannaford, which has a Zero Food Waste program, provided donations across multiple food categories like produce, dairy, and meat, while other retailers donated less of a variety.⁸ Since the URL went into effect, the food bank has received more inquiries into the donation process and is continuing to support opportunities for retailers to maximize donations across all categories.⁹

A model for other states

As seen in Vermont, the topic of food waste cuts across multiple sectors and creates an opportunity to bring together diverse stakeholders around a common goal. The Vermont Foodbank was involved in initial conversations with state agencies, including the Department of Environmental Conservation and Department of Health, which fostered collaboration around the donation aspect of the URL.¹⁰ In addition, the strong network of emergency food organizations helped to alleviate pressure on the food bank to be the sole distributor of the increased donations.

Overall, the URL has expanded access to healthier food for those experiencing food insecurity throughout Vermont¹¹ and serves as a model for other states. Is tackling food waste really going after the low-hanging fruit? According to Josh, the topic of food waste is paramount: “It’s a question of when, not if, your state is going to talk about food waste.”¹²

See our [Policy Approaches to Healthier Food Banking](#) resource for more ways to leverage public policy to increase access to nutritious food.

For more information, please contact the Center for Science in the Public Interest at policy@cspinet.org.

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- ¹ Kelly J, personal communication, 2021.
 - ² Kelly J, personal communication, 2021.
 - ³ Kelly J, personal communication, 2021.
 - ⁴ Morley K, personal communication, 2021.
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 - ⁶ Morley K, personal communication, 2021.
 - ⁷ Morley K, personal communication, 2021.
 - ⁸ Morley K, personal communication, 2021.
 - ⁹ Morley K, personal communication, 2021.
 - ¹⁰ Morley K, personal communication, 2021.
 - ¹¹ Morley K, personal communication, 2021.
 - ¹² Kelly J, personal communication, 2021.