

Frequently Asked Questions

About FoodCycle

Why have we implemented this food scraps program?

This program has two main goals. The first is to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, which are generated by the decomposition of food scraps in the landfill. The second is to reduce the amount of food scraps going to landfill disposal. Food scraps are by far the largest remaining item Sunnyvale residents are disposing in their garbage carts. A waste characterization conducted for the City by Cascadia Consulting Group found that food scraps made up 33 percent of the garbage collected from single-family residences. No other single component was higher than 6.5 percent.

The City currently sends 4,000 tons of residential food scraps to the landfill each year. When disposed of in a landfill, food is decomposed by anaerobic bacteria that produce methane, a powerful greenhouse gas. Keeping the food scraps from the landfill is important not only as a way to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, but also helps Sunnyvale meet its zero waste goals of 90 percent diversion by 2030.

What City and State goals does this program support?

On April 23, 2013, Council adopted the Zero Waste diversion goal of 75 percent by 2020 and 90 percent by 2030. The most recent official state measure of Sunnyvale diversion was 63 percent in 2019. The Zero Waste Strategic Plan identifies food scraps as by far the largest remaining item Sunnyvale residents are disposing in their garbage carts. With new state regulation, SB 1383, requiring all single family, multi-family and commercial business have food and yard trimming collection set up, the City will be able to keep most organics from going to the landfill.

Diverting food from landfill disposal also helps the City meet its Climate Action Playbook goals by reducing the amount of methane created when food decomposes in the landfill. Food scraps are addressed specifically in Play 4A under the "Managing Resources Sustainably" Strategy: Implement and expand food scraps diversion programs to include additional businesses and multi-family residences.

Organics separation and collection was first mandated for businesses by California Assembly Bill 1826. Organics recycling then became mandatory for all California residences and businesses by Senate Bill 1383, which begins enforcement in 2022.

How do you know this program will work?

A 500+ home pilot program was conducted in 2015 and was effective in gaining high levels of resident participation (73 percent) and capture of available food scraps (62 percent). Based on this success, Council approved a Citywide rollout of food scraps service, which was completed by the end of 2017.

A detailed "lid flipping" cart study conducted in early 2018 found that 55 percent of customers were placing their food scraps (and only food scraps) in the correct side of the FoodCycle cart. Collection truck scale records confirm that 55 percent (by weight) of residential food scraps are being captured by the FoodCycle program.

Why not put food in with yard trimmings or in a separate container?

Food scraps composting capacity in and near the Bay Area is very limited. It is also expensive and difficult to permit new facilities that compost food, whether mixed with yard trimmings or not. Combining food scraps with yard trimmings in Sunnyvale would generate 20,000 tons of material and there are no facilities available to take that quantity. Keeping the food scraps separate from yard trimmings enables more options for reuse, whether processed into animal feed or used in anaerobic digestion for energy. If we used a separate container for food scraps, the extra trucks and carts needed would increase collection costs and cause additional wear and tear on the streets from collection truck traffic. Residents would also have to store four carts instead of three.

The outreach information says 33 percent of residential waste is food. Where did that number come from?

A waste characterization study was conducted for the City by Cascadia Consulting Group in 2010. The study found that food scraps made up 33 percent of the garbage collected from single-family residences. No other single component was higher than 6.5 percent.

Are commercial businesses and schools required to recycle their food scraps?

Yes. California's Short-Lived Climate Pollutants Law, SB 1383, requires businesses to separate and recycle their organics. The City started collecting food scraps from businesses in 2011 and from schools in 2017. City staff have implemented food scraps collection at large companies to meet requirements of AB 1826. Staff is now focusing on making sure smaller businesses and schools are compliant with the new mandatory requirements in SB 1383. This program is recycling over 4,000 tons per year and growing steadily as more businesses and schools are added.

Are mobile home communities included in FoodCycle?

Yes. Mobile home communities have FoodCycle service. Residents should contact their property manager for questions about the FoodCycle program at their site.

Are townhouses and apartments included in FoodCycle?

All homes receiving single-family cart service (including townhouses with that service) are included in FoodCycle. FoodCycle will be expanded to all multi-family housing with cart or bin service by 2022. Apartments with cart service will have their garbage carts replaced with split carts. Apartments with bin service will receive a "food scraps only" cart for tenants to share and place their food scraps. City staff are currently working to set up food scraps recycling for multi-family complexes; until it's established, residents of apartments and condominiums in Sunnyvale may drop off food scraps for no charge at the SMaRT Station Recycling Center. All food scraps should be in either clear plastic bags or compostable bags.

Countertop pails for food scraps collection are available for multi-family residents at the SMaRT Station office or Utilities counter at City Hall. Proof of residency is required to receive a pail.

What happens to food scraps once they're collected?

Food scraps are unloaded at the SMaRT Station. There, a "bag-breaking" machine breaks apart and discards plastic or compostable bags. After going through a few more steps, food scraps are converted to a liquid mash. This mash is nutrient-rich and has many uses, such as:

- Fertilizer that enriches soil and compost
- Energy source for anaerobic digesters, including Sunnyvale's Water Pollution Control Plant
- FDA-approved animal feed ingredient for pigs, poultry or fish

Uses for food mash vary depending on market demand and available processing techniques. Food mash is versatile, so we can make the best choice based on environmental impact, technology and cost.

Why is the food scraps side of the cart so large?

At the City's request, Specialty Solid Waste worked with the cart and truck manufacturers to test several designs, including (1) making the food side of the cart narrower and (2) angling the cart divider to increase the capacity of the garbage side. The first design caused garbage to fall into and contaminate the food scraps hopper of the truck. The second resulted in bagged garbage failing to fall out of the cart during collection. The current cart design enables both compartments to empty reliably into the correct sides of the truck hoppers. The City has asked Specialty to continue to work with the cart manufacturer on ideas for reducing the size of the food scraps compartment.

I don't generate much food waste, why do I need to participate?

Even if you generate a small amount of food scraps, there will be times when you likely have food to get rid of. For example, leftovers that have spoiled, extra food from holiday meals, Halloween pumpkins and spoiled fruit and vegetables from back yard trees and gardens can all be placed in the food side of the cart. Additionally, trimmings from meal preparation, plate scrapings after eating, emptying out to-go containers and fridge and pantry clean-outs can also be included. If you have no food scraps for the week, you can leave the food side of the cart empty.

I compost in my back yard; how do I participate?

The curbside food scrap program puts to good use food items that are not suitable for home composting. This includes meat, cheese, and other dairy scraps that should not be included in backyard compost. Spoiled leftovers, food from a refrigerator or pantry clean-out, extras from holiday meals, meat, bones and dairy, egg shells, citrus peelings, fallen fruit from back yard trees, etc., can also be placed in the food side of the cart.

Can't I just put food scraps down my garbage disposal?

Incidental amounts of food are unavoidable in your garbage disposal, but collecting food scraps in the FoodCycle cart allows for a better use of the nutrient value of the material.

Will we have a rodent problem with the program?

When we tested this system during the pilot program, it did not create issues with rodents. Ever since starting food scraps collection with single-family homes in late 2017, there have not been any reported issues with rodents.

What type of plastic bag should I use to put my food scraps in?

We recommend using clear plastic bags or reusing produce, bread or other plastic bags so long as they are clear (not opaque). You may also use compostable bags, but experience has shown those bags degrade and break apart easily, causing spills and mess in your cart. You may also wrap the food scraps in newspaper and place them into the cart. The plastic and paper will get screened out during the pre-processing of the food scraps, so they will not have an impact on the final product. We have also confirmed that Costco and Amazon carry compostable and clear bags in a size that fits the pails.

Can I use twist ties to tie off the plastic bag before placing into the food side of the split cart?

No, please tie a knot in the top of the bag. The twist ties have metal in them that is difficult to remove during pre-processing of the food scraps.

What if I have extra garbage that won't fit in my cart?

Extra garbage that does not fit in the garbage side of the cart can be bagged and placed curbside with an Extra Garbage Bag Tag purchased at local grocery stores, the SMaRT Station, Community Center and City Hall Annex. Go to Sunnyvale.ca.gov and search "Extra Garbage Tags" to find locations.

Another option is to place extra garbage out for a no-charge On-Call Collection appointment (residents get two appointment per year). Use the Sunnyvale Recycles Right app or call Utilities Customer Service at 408-730-7400 to schedule a collection.

The City also has no charge, Extra Dumping Weekend events scheduled in spring and fall each year. For a current schedule, go to Sunnyvale.ca.gov and search "Extra Dumping Weekends."

Doesn't the food and garbage get mixed together when the truck picks up the materials?

No. The truck has two compartments. One side collects the garbage and the other side, separated by a divider, collects the food scraps.

Why not use a different truck to pick up a separate container for food scraps?

Using the same split cart/split truck technology to pick up garbage and food scraps allows the City to add food scraps service without increasing the number of trucks and carts in use. This keeps the cost of collecting food scraps low and does not increase wear and tear on streets from collection truck traffic.

FoodCycle service rates

FoodCycle service is, like yard trimmings and recycling collection, part of the bundle of solid waste services you pay for through refuse collection rates. Those rates are based on the garbage capacity of the cart that you select for service. Space provided for recycling, yard trimmings, and food scraps is not counted when collection rates are determined. When FoodCycle first started for single-family homes, the new rate structure was designed to return the same amount of revenue as the old structure. To view current utility rates, go to Sunnyvale.ca.gov and search "Utility Rates".

Rates are adjusted annually as part of the City's 20-year financial plan.

Is this program costing or saving the City money? If it's saving money, will residents see a reduction in rates?

The City pays our vendor to process the food scraps, so there is a cost associated with processing. However, by keeping the material out of the landfill, we save money by eliminating SMaRT Station® processing and landfill disposal costs. The resulting net operational savings will help moderate garbage rates in the future.

When were the Zero Waste Policy and FoodCycle Program approved?

The City Council has taken several actions on this program, as listed below:

- In December 2008, Council approved the Zero Waste Policy (RTC 08-358, Council Policy 3.2.4).
- On April 23, 2013, Council adopted the Zero Waste diversion goal of 75 percent by 2020, among other actions.
- To assure market outlets for both the commercial and residential food scraps collection programs, on January 5, 2016, Council approved multi-year contracts with facilities that would accept and recycle the materials collected by those programs. (RTC 15-1075)
- On September 20, 2016, Council reviewed the results of the pilot program conducted in 2015 and approved Citywide implementation of the residential split-cart/split-truck program. (RTC 16-0844)

Please visit our website regularly for updates. Go to Sunnyvale.ca.gov and search “FoodCycle.”

Updated 5/6/2021