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## San Diego launches new era of food waste composting

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The Sheraton Hotel on Harbor Island is joining the small group of large-scale facilities that compost food waste in San Diego. After years of work, the idea is starting to catch on will smaller sites such as grocery stores. — Earnie Grafton

A garbage truck on Tuesday morning picked up food scraps from seven grocery stores around [San Diego](#) and chugged to Miramar Landfill in what normally would have been an unremarkable moment.

But instead of turning into the zone for dumping trash, it delivered the mash of fruit, pastries and similar items to the [composting](#) yard and launched what many around the region hope is a new era of waste-reduction.

The deposit marked the start of [Waste Management](#)'s first dedicated food-waste route in the county. The pilot program is poised to expand such that city waste officials predict food collections will double over the next few years and eventually reach into residential neighborhoods much like blue bins for [recycling](#) bottles and cans slowly became the norm.

“It’s a fantastic moment,” said Ana Carvalho, [food waste](#) expert for San Diego’s Environmental Services Department. “It’s going to go well and that will open other doors for growth.”

Food might seem inconsequential in the vast stream of garbage but it’s the second-largest category of municipal solid waste generated nationwide, with some 34 million tons a year. Only about 3 percent of it is recycled, creating the largest single segment of discarded goods in the nation and what the [U.S. Environmental Protection Agency](#) calls a “staggering” problem.

Locally, an estimated 140,000 tons of food waste reaches Miramar Landfill annually, generating greenhouse gases and taking up valuable space. Roughly one-third of that is from commercial kitchens and the rest is from homes.

“We don’t want to run out of space in the landfill because we’re burying materials that can be reused,” Carvalho said.

San Diego city diverts about 66 percent of its overall waste stream of residential and commercial garbage, well above the state mandate of 50 percent and a major increase from the early 2000s. While the city isn’t on the front edge of food-waste composting — [San Francisco](#) already has residential food waste collection — the new alliance between Waste Management and Albertsons is a sign of progress, said Pauline Martinson, head of the environmental group I Love a Clean San Diego.

“We are getting there, and it’s a good step in the right direction, but I think we have to target the residents” with food waste collection, Martinson said.

There are no immediate plans for that, but the Albertsons route begins building the kind of infrastructure that will allow the industry to add more mid-sized customers who don’t create enough food waste to warrant stand-alone collections.

To date, it’s been the realm of the very big — such as the San Diego Convention Center and [Petco Park](#) — and the very small — such as backyard gardeners who do it themselves. That’s changing now that Waste Management is buying a specialized food-hauling truck for the county and testing a food-to-energy plant in Orange County.



Isadora Velarde separates vegetable discards from her salads in order for them to be recycled in the kitchens of the Sheraton San Diego Hotel and Marina on Harbor Island. The hotel just adopted a major food waste recycling program that can dramatically reduce the amount of food waste going to a landfill in Miramar. Now, the clean food waste is sent to a recycling center where it is turned into compost. — Earnie Grafton /

Other companies are looking to create food-only routes as well. And San Diego, which runs the only licensed commercial food-waste composting site in the county, two years ago tripled the footprint of its composting areas for green waste and food waste, giving it plenty of room to grow.

“Many green customers have maximized their recycling programs and they’re looking for that next incremental step to reach zero waste,” said Charissa [McAfee](#), local community affairs manager for Waste Management. “Food waste is really the next logical step and something we are really focused on.”

So is John [Ford](#), manager at Sheraton San Diego Hotel & Marina on Harbor Island. Five weeks after launching a new food waste program, it’s on pace to divert about 200 tons of trimmings and scrapings away from the landfill each year.

## COMPOSTING

Instead of taking up space in the city’s Miramar Landfill, food waste and yard trimmings are deposited in a special area known as The Greenery.

- The yard trimmings and food scraps are placed in long piles called windrows.
- The rows is turned and watered for 70 days.
- Microorganisms digest the carbon- and nitrogen-rich mixture, causing the rows to reach temperatures over 140 degrees. Cooking eliminates most weed seeds and pathogens while breaking down the organic material into soil nutrients.
- Finished compost is screened to a particle size of one-half inch or less which also removes film plastic from the final product.
- The product is given to city residents in small batches and sold in larger quantities to city residents and others who want it for their gardens.

Source: San Diego city

The program started with a mishap; the hotel's aged machine for dehydrating excess food — water adds enormous weight and therefore cost — broke down early this summer. Waste Management officials connected Ford with Carvalho, and that led to a major reorganization of the hotel's entire waste-diversion process.

“We thought we were doing more than we were,” Ford said. “We realized we were only doing a so-so job.”

That's changed since the staff of about 500 was trained on the new initiatives, including separating food waste in specially marked kitchen bins. Ford said it's been challenging to meet the city's goals for 99 percent pure food waste, a target designed to ensure top-quality compost.

Less than two months into it, the Sheraton is capturing more than five tons a week of trimmings from the kitchens and scrapings from plates. The initiative has pushed the hotel's overall waste-diversion rate from about 15 percent to about 80 percent and Ford is pressing for 90 percent.

“It's hard to believe,” Ford said. “When you look at the numbers, how could you not be excited?”

He predicts interest in food waste composting will grow rapidly once other facility managers realize how much money they can save. Disposal fees for food waste at Miramar Landfill are less than half of the rate for trash.

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