

FACT SHEET

FOOD IN LANDFILLS DRIVES CLIMATE CHANGE: STATE POLICIES CAN STOP IT

In the U.S., we waste about 40 percent of our food, and the bulk of that wasted food ends up in a landfill or incinerator. In fact, food is the most prevalent material in municipal landfills, making up about a quarter of our landfill content by weight.¹ This is a problem for multiple environmental and ethical reasons.

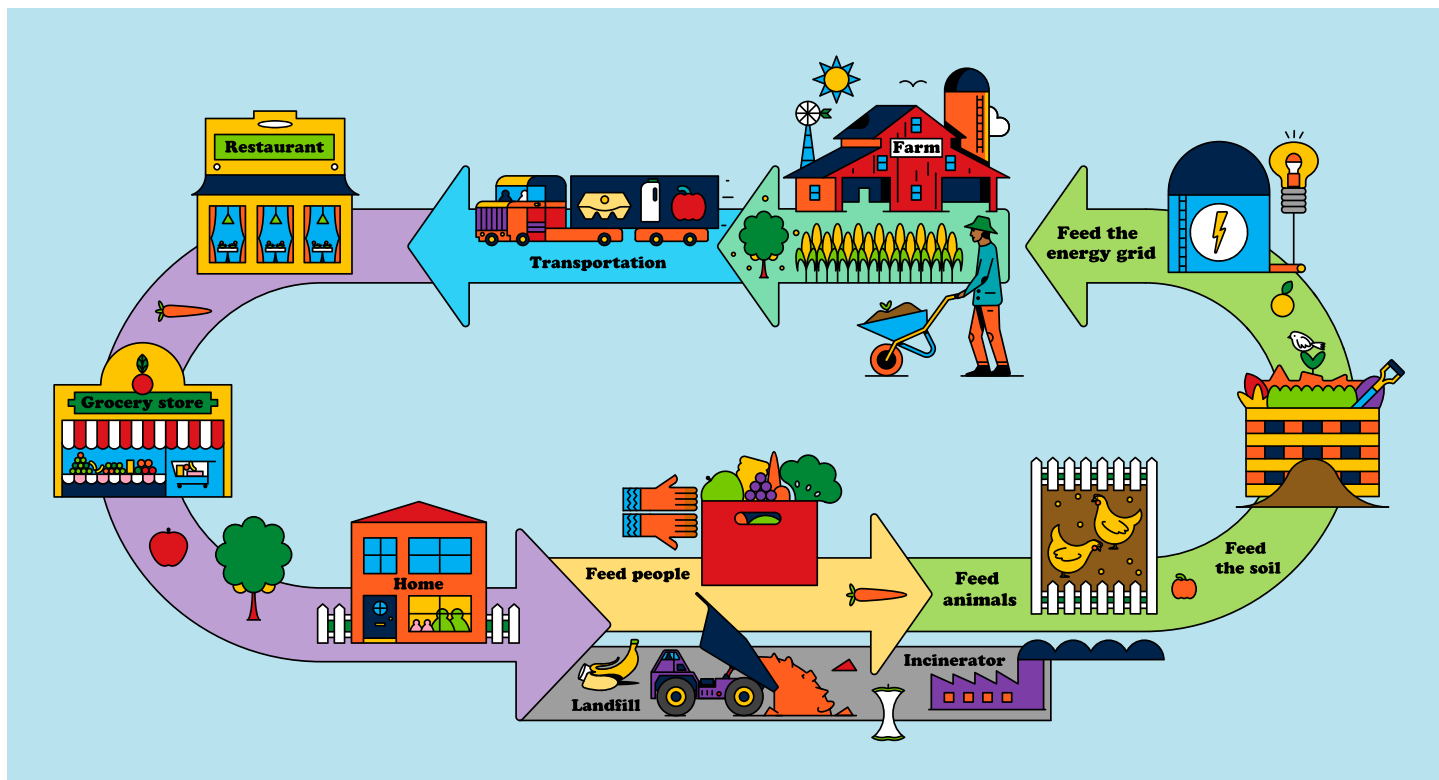
When food and other non-edible organic materials (including yard waste and paper) are disposed of in landfills, they begin to decompose, and as they do, they release methane. This makes landfills the third largest source of methane emissions from human activities in the U.S.² Similarly, when waste is burned in incinerators—most of which are located in environmental justice communities—they emit significantly more greenhouse gases per unit of energy than coal-fired plants.^{3,4} On top of that, producing, processing, transporting, and storing food that we don't consume swallows up nearly 20 percent of America's cropland, fertilizers, and freshwater.⁵ All told, wasting food in the U.S. generates as much annual greenhouse gas emissions as 58 million passenger vehicles.⁶

Wasting this much food is also expensive; the average U.S. household of four wastes around \$3,000 a year on food they purchase but never consume.⁷ Additionally, landfills are rapidly filling up and opening new ones will cost hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars.

But food waste in landfills and incinerators is not just a climate or financial issue; it's also a moral issue. In 2023, even as 1 in 7 Americans struggled with food security, we wasted the equivalent of 120 billion meals, roughly enough to feed 1/3 of the U.S. for a year.^{8,9}



Food is the number one material in landfills by weight.



IT DOESN'T HAVE TO BE THIS WAY

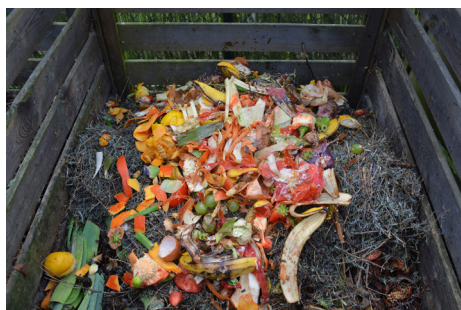
Food waste diversion policies allow states to prevent food from being disposed of in landfills and incinerators. As a result, states, cities, residents, institutions, and businesses must find better solutions for their food waste—including rightsizing purchasing, donating surplus food, or recycling it through composting or other methods.

Food waste diversion policies are a powerful tool to fight climate change, strengthen food security, spur local economies by creating jobs in food rescue and composting, and put money back into households' budgets that would have been spent on wasted food. Data from states with these policies already in place show that they're effective—they encourage green infrastructure development, generate more food donations, and significantly decrease the amount of food disposed. For example, after three years Vermont's Universal Recycling Law resulted in 54 percent of food being diverted from the state's landfills.¹⁰ In New York, just one year after implementation of their Food Donation and Food Scraps Recycling Law, food donations in the state increased

by 60 percent.¹¹ Moreover, research shows that implementing widespread, comprehensive diversion programs actually drives down the costs of composting or other diversion techniques.¹²

WHAT NRDC IS DOING ABOUT IT

Despite proven successes in places like Vermont, California, and Massachusetts, progress towards food waste diversion policies has been uneven and largely undercut by loopholes, weak enforcement, and widespread pushback from the waste industry and food waste generators. For that reason, NRDC is leading efforts to pass ambitious, enforceable food waste diversion policies that expand infrastructure and education for food waste prevention, food rescue, and food scrap recycling. We are doing this alongside a vast network of partners that want to reduce food waste, like food banks, environmental justice groups, waste haulers, and municipalities. In partnership, we can ensure these laws deliver on their full potential—for climate, communities, and the economy.



Endnotes

- 1 U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, *National Overview: Facts and Figures on Materials, Wastes and Recycling*, last updated September 11, 2025, accessed October 31, 2025, <https://www.epa.gov/facts-and-figures-about-materials-waste-and-recycling/national-overview-facts-and-figures-materials>.
- 2 U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, *Basic Information about Landfill Gas*, last updated September 12, 2025, accessed October 31, 2025, <https://www.epa.gov/land-research/quantifying-methane-emissions-landfilled-food-waste>.
- 3 The New School, Tishman Environment and Design Center, *U.S. Municipal Solid Waste Incinerators: An Industry in Decline*, May 2019, https://www.no-burn.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/CR_GaiaReportFinal_05.21.pdf.
- 4 New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, *Matter of the Application of Covanta Energy Corporation for Inclusion of Energy from Waste Facilities as an Eligible Technology in the Main Tier of the Renewable Portfolio Standard Program. Case No. 03-E-0188*, August 19, 2011, <http://documents.dps.ny.gov/public/Common/ViewDoc.aspx?DocRefId={DEEA097E-A9A6-4E53-898C-0BC2F4C60CC4}>.
- 5 Dana Gunders and Jonathan Bloom, NRDC, 2017, *Wasted: How America Is Losing Up to 40 Percent of Its Food From Farm to Fork to Landfill*, August 2017, accessed October 31, 2025, www.nrdc.org/sites/default/files/wasted-2017-report.pdf.
- 6 Andrea Collins, NRDC, 2021, *Feeding a City: Food Waste and Food Need Across America*, October 2021, accessed October 31, 2025, <https://www.nrdc.org/sites/default/files/feeding-city-food-waste-food-need-report.pdf>.
- 7 U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, *Estimating the Cost of Food Waste to American Consumers*, last updated April 4, 2025, accessed October 31, 2025, <https://www.epa.gov/land-research/estimating-cost-food-waste-american-consumers>.
- 8 US Census Bureau. 2023. *U.S. Population Trends Return to Pre-Pandemic Norms as More States Gain Population*, December 19, 2023, <http://census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2023/population-trends-return-to-pre-pandemic-norms.html>.
- 9 ReFED, *From Surplus to Solutions: 2025 ReFED U.S. Food Waste Report*, <https://refed.org/downloads/refed-us-food-waste-report-2025.pdf>.
- 10 Vermont Department of Environmental Conservation, *2023 Vermont Waste Composition Study*, May 2024, <https://dec.vermont.gov/sites/dec/files/wmp/SolidWaste/Documents/2023-VT-Waste-Composition-Study.pdf>.
- 11 New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, *New York State Food Donation and Food Scraps Recycling Law Report to the Governor and Legislature 2023*, July 2024, <https://dec.ny.gov/sites/default/files/2024-07/2023foodannualreport.pdf>.
- 12 Los Angeles County Integrated Waste Management Task Force, *SB1383 Local Service Rates Analysis*, November 19, 2020, https://dpw.lacounty.gov/epd/tf/Attachments/Minutes_Attachments/2020_Attachments/SB_1383_Local_Service_Rates_Analysis.pdf.