

BVPPH Newsletter to our Food Establishments

BVPPH – Blackstone Valley Partnership for Public Health

Representing the Towns of Blackstone, Douglas, Hopedale, Mendon, Millville, Northbridge, Upton and Uxbridge
Volume Number: 2023 Issue Number: February 2023

Dear Newsletter Recipient,

Welcome to the first Quarterly Newsletter from the Blackstone Valley Partnership for Public Health for the year of 2023! This month's topic was created in response to updates on waste disposal regulations recently instituted by the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection (MassDEP). In light of these changes, we would like to give food establishments a quick run-down of their new requirements (specifically with respect to food waste). This will include a quick run-down of ways to reduce food waste in your establishments, whether that be on-site or through donations, composting, and/or other means. This document will include a robust reference section containing various tools and more detailed guidelines for those wishing to learn more, and to make any potential transition as accessible as possible.

Overview

Created in January 2022 and first implemented in November 2022, the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection's (MassDEP) new Commercial Organic Waste Ban makes a change to the limiting threshold for how much commercial organic material a business can put into the waste stream per week. Prior to this change, the limit was one ton per week. At present, the new limit is 0.5 (or one-half) tons per week, fully half of the previous threshold limit.

Guidance for specific businesses and events, and how the new ban affects them, are discussed in a document published to MassDEP's website, linked below for convenience. For the purposes of this article, we will be focusing on ways for businesses to reduce their commercial organic waste so as to not trigger the ban. For more specific information about the new policy itself, please see below: <https://www.mass.gov/doc/guidance-for-businesses-institutions-haulers-commercial-organic-materials-waste-ban/download>

Food Waste Reduction

The first (and most effective) way to reduce the likelihood that your business exceeds the threshold is to reduce food waste at the source: inside your restaurants/kitchens. These “in-house” methods of waste reduction will help you not only avoid the ban, but to save money and more efficiently make the most out of your products.

The first step to making a change in your business is to collect the facts: find out how much commercial organic waste your business generates. This can be done a number of ways. First, the old-fashioned way. You can simply get the weight of organic waste produced by your business over the span of a week, and compare it against the limit placed by the new ban. This becomes easier if you separate out commercial organic waste (like food waste) from other waste streams, and this separation is a good habit to build, particularly if you wish to compost your waste (see below). Alternatively, there is software available that can estimate your average weekly waste. You can do this on your own, or hire the assistance of a third party company to both help you track your waste product and help organize a plan to reduce it.

Once you know how much waste you’re generating, your next step is to determine where it comes from. This too requires a bit of homework. Consider carefully tracking inventory with every shipment if you do not already do so, and keep an eye on customer trends. If you know a certain dish is extremely popular in your establishment, it would make sense to order a large quantity of its ingredients. But ingredients for less popular dishes might not be used before they expire if bought in the same quantity, so make adjustments as trends change. Additionally, consider adjusting your portion sizes based on customer feedback and your employee observations. If a dish is frequently left largely uneaten or discarded at your establishment, it may be that the portion size is too large. If you witness this trend, consider adding more portion options to help reduce on food waste on the consumer end. If you cater to large events, you can apply this logic to preparing meals. How much food was eaten at past, similar events? How much needed to be discarded after the event? Use the answers to these questions to inform your purchasing habits, to avoid buying more than you need and generating excess waste and wasting your money.

Once the inventory is on-site, make an active effort to reduce the possibility of catastrophic food waste. Track temperatures carefully to make sure your food items stay safe to eat and are in good condition. Make sure to rotate your stock using a First-In-First-Out (FIFO) method, meaning that food items that arrived first or have an earlier expiration date should be stored so that they’ll naturally be used before food items that arrive later, or have later expiration dates. Keep careful track of your dates. For packaged items, keep an eye on the expiration dates often, and use evocative labels to encourage staff to use up food before they expire. For foods you make and then store, make sure to follow food code to monitor how long each type of food lasts, and do the same evocative labeling to make sure it gets used up before it has to be thrown away. Also, monitor your vendors to make sure the food they provide you is fresh for long enough to make use of it. If your vendor provides you food items only a week from their expiration date, and you know they won’t sell that fast, alert your vendor, or at worst, change vendors entirely.

You can also adjust your recipes and menu, both to accommodate smaller portion sizes and to use your ingredients more effectively. You can do this by feel or using digital software (see some advice below in the reference section). Practice batch-cooking, where you only prepare food in smaller batches as needed rather than in larger quantities. Also, consider using nose-to-tail and root-to-stalk cooking. Portions of food that wouldn’t otherwise be considered prime ingredients could be repurposed to make stews or broths. Some

food items (like bruised bananas) aren't aesthetically pleasing, but that doesn't make them unsafe. To avoid wasting those products without worrying about customer reactions, consider repurposing them as ingredients in recipes where the blemish wouldn't be visible. With the bruised banana example, consider using them as ingredients for a smoothie. Finally, avoid using food items for garnish if they aren't commonly eaten.

Of course, like implementing any major strategy inside your own establishment, making sure your staff are on-board and trained to implement the new strategy is crucial. Make sure there's time for training and re-training, so staff understand new recipes or portion sizes, practice efficient cutting techniques and batch-cooking, portion uniformity, and so on. Practice active listening and solicit staff feedback. This will allow you to determine what does and doesn't work, and make adjustments to less effective methods. Remember, sometimes it's a good idea to have one particularly motivated staff member who is well trained in the new strategy model proper behavior and motivate their fellow staff. Encourage compliance by making the process easier to adopt. Finally, when running events, inform staff and other vendors that you are using a food waste management plan. Keep active headcounts prior to the event to ensure you haven't prepared too much. Finally, make sure to debrief staff after events to make adjustments for the future based on what did and did not work as intended.

Alternatives to the Waste Stream

Even if you implement all of the strategies above, eliminating food waste entirely is likely impossible. However, just because your establishment generates food waste or has excess product, it does not mean that it has to contribute to the waste stream. Alternatives do exist.

For instance, one common practice with most commercial organic wastes is composting. One could also send food waste to an anaerobic digester, or other alternative means of disposal. Finally, food items that are intact and in viable condition can be donated to ensure the food items aren't wasted.

In all of these examples, it helps to know what resources you have available in your area. Reach out to local donation drives and compost sites and determine what options you have, what the process is for pick-up, or if there are any limitations to services. However, as always, there are a few things to keep in mind.

With respect to donations, remember that food intended for donation **must be safe for human consumption**. If the food has a foul odor, off look, or you otherwise suspect it may be unsafe, you should compost it instead. Keep in touch with local donation banks to determine what items they need and how to transport them. Maintain transport logs to make sure that your donated items are in the same condition on arrival as they are when you donate them. For example, refrigerated food should be transported in a manner where they can be kept at low temperature, such as in refrigerated trucks, to ensure they are still safe on arrival. Maintain open lines of communication with your partners in these endeavors, and have written agreements with the organizations to which you donate food, so that everyone is on the same page in respect to what you are donating, how much, and how often. As with anything, make sure to create Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs) regarding your donations, and make sure staff are well trained in these, and have opportunities to provide feedback.

When it comes to collecting food for alternative disposal such as composting, there are also a few things to keep in mind. For instance, when discarding food intended for composting (such as kitchen scraps), you

should do so in a special container clearly labeled for that purpose. Much like trash containers, these should be leakproof and rodentproof, and that they can be covered when not in immediate use. They should also be emptied at the same rate as trash containers. These scraps should be kept in a separate trash container where the establishment keeps its dumpster, and much like a dumpster, this container should be capable of being closed and secured, and be leakproof and rodentproof. Just as with a regular dumpster, this area should be kept free of debris, and this container should be emptied often enough that it does not create a noxious odor or attract pests. In summer months, this may require more frequent removal. Establishments that dispose of foods prone to foul odors (like seafood) should also consider more frequent removal. Removal should be about twice a week in summer months, or once a week in the winter at least. The container should be thoroughly cleaned once a week at minimum, or more often if there is a foul odor or if the food scraps were exposed to heat or sunlight. As with any dumpster holding area, the ground should be non-absorbent, smooth, easy to clean, and sloped to drain. Some municipalities may require these spaces be walled or fenced off, and secured when not in use to reduce the possibility of windblown debris.

Please note that some towns in our area, such as Uxbridge, Blackstone, and Douglas offer compost bins to residents for a fee. Check with their respective health departments for more details. In addition, a list of all companies that accept organics for composting or anaerobic digestion can be found here:

<https://www.mass.gov/doc/map-list-of-massachusetts-sites-accepting-diverted-food-material-april-2022/download>

In Conclusion

Reducing food waste is both possible and, with enough work, can help save your establishment both money and resources, ensure you maintain quality food safety practices, and potentially build connections with local vendors, disposal companies, and donation centers. If you have concerns about exceeding the new commercial organic waste ban, the above methods can help reduce your impact. However, the above tips are not intended to be fully comprehensive. There are more resources to use and more to learn. To that end, please see our references section below for resources, guidance, and other tools that will be helpful in your efforts.

Blackstone Valley Partnership for Public Health - BVPPH

Blackstone Board of Health (508-883-1500 x129)
Hopedale Board of Health (508-634-2203 x222)
Douglas Board of Health (508-476-4000 x252)
Mendon Board of Health (508-634-2656)

Millville Board of Health (508-883-5041)
Northbridge Board of Health (508-234-3272)
Upton Board of Health (508-529-6813)
Uxbridge Board of Health (508-278-8600 x8)

References

Source Reduction of Food Waste Guide - <https://recyclingworksma.com/source-reduction-guidance/>

A Guide to Conducting Food Waste Assessment - https://www.epa.gov/sites/default/files/2015-08/documents/r5_fd_wste_guidebk_020615.pdf

EPA's Food Waste Prevention Guidance, by Establishment Type - <https://www.epa.gov/sustainable-management-food/food-loss-prevention-options-grade-schools-manufacturers-restaurants>

Guidance for Food Recovery Programs - <http://www.foodprotect.org/guides-documents/comprehensive-guidance-for-food-recovery-programs/>

EPA Tools for Preventing and Diverting Food Waste - <https://www.epa.gov/sustainable-management-food/tools-preventing-and-diverting-wasted-food>

EPA Guide to Anaerobic Digestion - <https://www.epa.gov/anaerobic-digestion>

Food Resource Locator - <https://foodrescuelocator.com/>