



# BIOCYCLE

JOURNAL OF COMPOSTING & ORGANICS RECYCLING

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## FOOD RECYCLING AT SPECIAL EVENTS



Festivals and fairs are ideal to divert organics and educate vendors and the public about recycling and composting.



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At last year's festivals, vendor food material was targeted, while carts were provided to implement a uniform program for all participants.

## FESTIVAL FOOD RECYCLING

# SUN, FUN AND DIVERSION

*Experiences recycling food residuals at Seattle festivals last year showcased methods to use for containers, carts, biodegradable bags and overall procedures to insure success.*

*Sam Wilder*

**F**ESTIVAL SEASON is a great time to think about sunny days, music, and food — as well as how to capture food residuals! Two major festivals in Seattle last year conducted pilot food waste collection programs at the Seattle Center.

These programs provide a framework for other festivals and collection strategies.

Seattle Public Utilities (SPU) partnered with Seattle Center and two city festivals in 2005 to trial vendor food recycling — the first during three days in July with an estimated 400,000 attendees and 45 vendors; the second during four days in August with an estimated 150,000 attendees and 60 vendors. SPU also provided funding support and assistance to organizers for collection. It also had an on-site presence the whole weekend with staff and volunteers to help with food recycling. Vendor food material was targeted, rather than scraps from the general public, since this was the first year for recycling compostables.

Festival organizers and site and city staff worked together to plot the best ways to organize food collection at existing festivals. Obstacles included having a tight footprint for containers (for kitchen containers in vendor booths and for carts for hauler pickup), high turnover of food booth employees throughout the festivals and nightly collections of material.

Program components were developed based on the specific needs of each festival. Kitchen containers (16-gallon “slim jims”), 96-gallon carts and biodegradable bags were provided to vendors to implement a uniform program for all participants. Vendors were responsible for carrying biodegradable bags full of food scraps to carts located nearby. Carts were tagged when full, and picked up nightly by the hauler after festival hours. The material was taken to Cedar Grove Composting in the Seattle region for composting. Cedar Grove only accepts biodegradable bags that it has tested for biodegradability in its composting system. (See “Biodegradable Plastics Make Market Inroads,” May 2006.)

### PROGRAM CHALLENGES AND SUCCESSES

Outreach materials were incorporated with other festival education materials. Vendors were responsible for carrying biodegradable bags filled with food residuals to carts located nearby. On-site staff helped avoid problems.



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dors received an introduction to food waste collection in their packets. Once the festivals were underway, on-site personnel visited the vendors daily to assist them in participating in this brand new program. Educational materials given to businesses included stickers for containers and posters with photos of what could and could not be included.

The program was optional for vendors, but only three or four out of about 100 vendors did not participate. (The decision to pilot food recycling was made after vendors had filled out their applications and were approved. In future events, agreeing to recycle food could be part of the application process (see sidebar).) Reasons for not participating included not having much food waste, tight booth space, and staff who felt they were too busy to sort materials. Most vendors, however, had tight space but still found room for a food waste collection container.

Top contaminants found in food waste containers included plastic gloves, plastic film and plastic utensils. Having food recycling staff (through city of Seattle) and volunteers on-site to monitor containers helped combat these issues before they became a problem. When these items were found in kitchen containers, food compost staff let vendors know.

It was difficult to "hide" carts from the public. Although carts had large signs, some

With daily education, staff quickly grasped the concept of the diversion program and what materials could be included for project success.

carts were in locations where festival participants (general public) walked by. Participants often put garbage in these carts. This issue was solved by turning cart lids away from easy access, and placing an easy access garbage container beside them.

Although some contaminants were found in containers, overall there was very little contamination. Only one container throughout both festivals was emptied as garbage due to noncompostables. All other carts contained clean, organic material. Contaminants were removed from the containers by staff and volunteers at the vendors' booths while they were more accessible (i.e., before the bags were tied closed and put in the 96-gallon carts).

Vendors seemed to "catch on" quickly. There were many staff members involved with each booth, so the program could be easily understood. With daily education, staff seemed to grasp the concept of the program and what materials could be included.

The collection system for both festivals worked well. Providing uniform kitchen containers, biodegradable bags and carts, maximized the available tight festival space and made the education message easier to convey. An efficient collection system helped vendor participation. Providing a "made program" eliminated issues that may have occurred if each vendor had tried to create their own system.





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## TOP TIPS FOR INCLUDING FOOD RECYCLING AT FESTIVALS

**V**ENDORS have probably not participated in food recycling projects. They may be less likely to participate at their business location if they have a negative experience at a special event, such as a festival. There are a number of action items that can help make local festival food recycling a success, and most key components are related to education. These top tips can be summarized as follows:

1) Have on-site food waste staff or volunteers during the festival. Food waste collection is still very new for many people. Although vendor staff may have the right intentions, they are still unfamiliar with types of materials that can be composted. Having staff or volunteers on-site can help address these issues as they arise.

2) Provide signage for all containers. Mark all containers with signage indicating what can and cannot be put in the food collection program. This will be a reference for the vendors throughout the event and will help to provide informa-

tion to employees during the festival.

3) Incorporate education materials in regular festival materials. Avoid making food recycling a separate part of the festival or an "add on" idea. If vendors need to apply to participate in the festival, include food recycling participation as one of the requirements for being part of the festival.

4) Train regular festival staff about food recycling. Festival staff should be aware of food waste containers and what can be included in the program. Vendors will have questions, and on-site staff can help provide quick answers.

5) For the first few festivals, involve people experienced in food waste collection with program set up and implementation. Compostable collection requires different considerations than garbage or regular recyclable collection. For example, staff and volunteers will need to be prepared to reach into containers and remove contaminants (which can be a messy task). Don't assume that festival staff can tackle this

alone during their first few festivals with food collection. Have a person or team with food waste collection experience involved to help ensure success. Festivals are fast paced and action-packed. There is not much room for on-site error. Problems need to be predicted and addressed prior to the festival so that when they occur (e.g., a bag breaking as the vendor removes it from the container, spilling the contents at the booth), a plan is in place to take care of it quickly.

6) Involve the hauler with program set up details. Make sure the hauler is involved with initial set up and kept up-to-date on program changes. Also be sure to have a way to reach the driver during the festival weekend, if any unexpected circumstances arise.

7) Make it as easy as possible. Vendors commented that the program was easy because: They did not need to separate food waste (meat could be included); Containers, biodegradable bags and signs were provided; and Collection carts were located near their booth.



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### COLLECTION AND SURVEY RESULTS

Almost six tons of food compost materials were collected from both festivals — a volume of about 40 cubic yards. Vending staff seemed excited to participate in a new program and were interested in information on composting the food scraps from the festival. Vendor staff comments included "worked really well" and "really liked the program."

Participants were surveyed after each festival. Here are some of the questions with responses:

Was food recycling easy for you? — 91 percent responded "Yes"; 5 percent responded "No". Did staff understand and participate in the program? — 89 percent responded "Yes"; 5 percent responded "No"; and 5 percent responded "Sort of".

Festival food recycling is an exciting new frontier. Utilize Seattle's experience and tips to start food recycling at your local festival. You'll not only be collecting organic materials, but you will also be helping to build a foundation to attract local businesses and residents to future programs. By taking advantage of high profile events such as festivals for food waste collection, your community can address a big garbage problem and turn it into a successful venture. ■

*Sam Wilder, President of Wilder Environmental Consulting ([www.wilderenvironmental.com](http://www.wilderenvironmental.com)), worked with the pilot food recycling trials in Seattle in 2005. She is also involved with projects at Sound Resource Management Group, Inc. ([www.zerowaste.com](http://www.zerowaste.com))*