

Save your food scraps, save the Earth: More cities and states look to composting

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In its fight against both climate change and rats, the New York City Council overwhelmingly passed a new ordinance earlier this month that will require residents to dispose of food scraps and yard waste in vermin-

proof curbside containers for future compost, diverting organic materials from landfills and turning them into rich soil.

If signed by Democratic Mayor Eric Adams, the city's mandate would be the largest municipal composting program in the country, keeping 8 million pounds of organic waste every day out of landfills (around the weight of 160 full garbage trucks) and drastically reducing the city's methane emissions.

The Big Apple's composting plans are both ambitious and aggressive, said Council Member Sandy Nurse, who chairs the Committee on Sanitation and pushed for a "[zero waste](#)" legislative package that includes the composting measure. The council passed it by a veto-proof margin. Once the city rolls out curbside organic waste collection by the end of next year, she said, New Yorkers will realize how "simple" the process is.

"New Yorkers want to do the right thing," she said. "This is going to create more access."

In the past decade, many U.S. communities of different sizes and political leanings have created mostly voluntary composting programs, with mandatory programs concentrated in large cities and a handful of blue states. Supporters say these programs reduce emissions, free up landfill space, create jobs and produce soil free of harmful fertilizers that pollute water sources.

However, the programs can be expensive. They require upfront investments in new bins and compost facilities, as well as in public education efforts to change long-held ideas of what goes in the trashcan.

While it takes time, some communities that have embraced composting programs have shown marked decreases in the amount of organic waste

that ends up in the dump and have saved taxpayer money in landfill fees.

Composting takes a shift in behavior and patience, said Sally Brown, a professor of environmental and forest sciences at the University of Washington who has studied the impacts of municipal composting programs.

"It's tough because it's really easy to put your [food waste](#) in the garbage," she said. "People very often underestimate the amount of education outreach that's required."

Expanding composting programs

In her Claremont, California, home, Katja Whitham keeps a covered metal pail on the kitchen counter and a bowl in the freezer, throwing in old coffee grounds, tea bags, vegetable peels, cheese and meat scraps. Once the pail fills up, she tosses the contents into her garden's composting pile or into the green bin the city distributed to residents last year.

As mandated under a new state law, Claremont requires that residents stop tossing food waste into garbage cans but instead separate it into a different lidded container. That container then is picked up weekly by the city's waste management and taken to a private composting facility, where the company sells the compost at its discretion, mostly for agriculture.

Whitham said she was excited to see her Los Angeles-area city roll out a mandatory composting program.

"I've always been environmentally conscious, so it was a no-brainer for me," she said. "It's easy once you get going, but it is an investment; it takes a little extra time and patience."

Food scraps and yard waste comprise around a third of municipal waste streams that head to landfills and incinerators. This is "problematic and not sustainable," said Eric A. Goldstein, a senior attorney at the Natural Resources Defense Council, an environmental advocacy group.

When buried in landfills, organic waste breaks down and releases methane, a greenhouse gas that traps 25 times more heat than carbon dioxide, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. When thrown in incinerators, moist organic waste requires intense energy consumption to keep the burner temperatures high. It also releases toxins into the air.

Mandatory composting programs have thrived over the past decade in cities such as San Francisco; Portland, Oregon; and Seattle. (Seattleites send 125,000 tons of food and yard waste to composting facilities each year, turning those scraps into compost for local parks and gardens.) Pilot programs are underway in Boston, Pittsburgh and Jacksonville, Florida.

States also are getting into composting. Nine states—California, Connecticut, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, Rhode Island, Vermont and Washington—have enacted laws over the past decade that divert organic waste from landfills to composting facilities, though composting requirements and opportunities for residents and businesses vary by state.

Last year, California began enacting a law requiring that municipalities set up mandatory curbside organic waste pickup and composting.

Of the 615 local jurisdictions in the state, 445 have set up their programs—a 70% compliance rate. There are 206 organic waste processing centers statewide, with an additional 20 being built right now. At these centers, food and yard waste is ground up, placed in heaping

rows, aerated by large machinery, and allowed to break down naturally into dirt, eventually being sold off in bulk, often ending up at farms.

Communities are realizing this is the easiest, cheapest thing they can do to fight [climate change](#), said Rachel Machi Wagoner, the director of California's Department of Resources Recycling and Recovery, commonly called CalRecycle. The [state legislature](#) allocated \$240 million total in recent years to help communities roll out their programs.

"Yes, this is really hard. This is really difficult. There are challenges in front of us," she said. "But I have seen such a willingness and a dedication from every level, from the individual household and business to the community to the government level. That has been really inspiring."

Once the state achieves its goal of reducing organic waste disposal by 75% of 2014 levels—down to 5.7 million tons of organic waste per year going to landfills—it will be equivalent to taking 3 million cars off the road, she added.

Of the remaining jurisdictions that have not complied with the law, 138 communities with low populations have applied for five-year exemptions, citing a lack of curbside waste removal services in vast rural areas.

Persuading people to participate has been a challenge, according to the Little Hoover Commission, a Sacramento-based bipartisan state oversight agency. This month, the commission sent a report to the governor and legislature that called for a pause in the state rollout, citing slow implementation, a need for public education and possible amendments to the law.

The state has missed targets, and communities are struggling, said Ethan

Rarick, executive director of the commission.

"The state needs to fix this," Rarick said. "Our commissioners would hope that this program serves as a model for other states or other municipalities in the country, but the first thing you have to do is actually move California down the road of getting to that goal."

CalRecycle's Wagoner rejects many of the commission's assertions. She said its data is outdated and the real numbers are moving in the right direction as more communities, some of which had to postpone programs because of the pandemic, comply with the law. The idea of pausing the statewide composting program doesn't make sense to her. It's up to the legislature and the governor to decide how to respond to the commission's report.

Wagoner does recognize the challenges with public education. She's seen the complaints on community forums, such as the social network Nextdoor, where residents have lamented an increase in black flies around alleyway composting bins, especially as the weather gets warmer.

Easing into composting

Mandatory composting programs are not for every community, environmental advocates admit. Success for these programs often means gradually bringing people on board voluntarily.

Many communities in states such as Kansas, Ohio and Texas offer food waste composting services for residents, but those programs are mostly voluntary. Across the country, 510 communities in 25 states, representing more than 10 million households, have municipal food scrap collection, according to a 2021 study from BioCycle, a compost-focused news service.

Earlier this year, Olathe, Kansas, a southwestern suburb of Kansas City, rolled out its new composting program, allowing residents to drop off their food and yard waste at a facility in town.

The city pays an organization around \$200 a month to pick up that waste two or three times per week and return with compost, which residents can later use for free. As of June 1, 526 residents have used the compost drop-off on a regular basis, said Cody Kennedy, chief communications and marketing officer for the city.

"You can bring in that disgusting bucket and then you can literally go visit our compost pile and take that home," he said. "We are offering residents an opportunity to dispose of their scraps in a more sustainable way."

For now, the program is voluntary, with only one drop-off location in the city of 145,000. However, depending on its success, Kennedy envisions that the city could build a second facility in the coming years. It's also gained some attention from Olathe's neighbors in the Kansas City area, said Kennedy, who expects other communities to follow their lead.

In New York City, mandatory composting has been a long time coming.

For the past decade, city leaders have sought to implement a citywide composting program, but mostly on a voluntary basis and through drop-off locations. Then-Mayor Michael Bloomberg told residents in 2013 that food waste is "New York City's final recycling frontier."

Once enacted into law, the composting program will roll out by borough, starting in Brooklyn and Queens in October. The city has until the end of the decade to build organic waste collection centers in each borough and meet its goal of diverting all its recyclables and organic waste that it sends to landfills in often low-income communities in Pennsylvania,

New Jersey and New York.

Goldstein, at the Natural Resources Defense Council, hopes New York City will inspire more communities nationwide to adopt mandatory [composting](#) programs. But, he admits, it will be a gradual process.

"When municipalities see that cities are in the lead on this, having successful programs, where the public is participating, and where some cost savings are actually possible, it's likely that they too will hop on the bandwagon," he said.

"It won't happen overnight, but over time."

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