



# HOW TO KEEP FOOD OUT OF ILLINOIS'S TRASH

## ILLINOIS FOOD WASTE FACTS

20%

Food waste makes up 20 percent of Illinois landfills<sup>1</sup>

\$13.8B

Illinois generated \$13.8B of surplus food in 2023<sup>2</sup>

86%

86 percent of Illinois's compostable material ends up in landfills<sup>3</sup>

Wasted food is a big problem in Illinois. After it's thrown away, food will rot in a landfill, generating the potent climate pollutant methane. Furthermore, wasting food squanders all of the resources used to produce it, including a tremendous amount of water, cropland, agricultural chemicals, energy, and money. And yet, food is the largest waste stream in Illinois landfills, accounting for approximately 20 percent of the 19 million tons of garbage produced in Illinois each year.<sup>4</sup> Much of this wasted food is wholesome and safe to eat if handled properly, and what isn't edible is compostable—it doesn't have to end up in landfills. This is especially important given that Illinois's landfills will fill up in less than 35 years on average; Chicago metropolitan area landfills will reach capacity in less than 9 years.<sup>5</sup>

A food scrap diversion law to redirect food waste away from landfills could help Illinois prevent harmful methane emissions, protect resources, and extend landfill capacity.

Eleven states already have food scrap diversion laws—California, Connecticut, Maine, Maryland, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New Jersey, New York, Rhode Island, Vermont, and Washington—and numerous cities and counties have similar policies. Some states restrict food and organic

materials from entering landfills and incinerators; others require food scrap recycling or mandate that all safe food be donated. These policies force homes, businesses, and institutions to pay attention to their food waste as they sort it out; research has shown that the act of separating food scraps from other discards, even without any additional training on waste prevention, can reduce a business's waste by 10 percent.<sup>6</sup>



## POLICY ACHIEVEMENTS IN OTHER STATES:

- In 2023 California rescued more than 400 million pounds of **surplus food**, achieving 94 percent of the target set in for 2025 under SB1383.<sup>7</sup>
- Massachusetts’s food waste recycling law resulted in a 150 percent increase in **job growth** and **new market opportunities** for haulers, food recovery organizations, and organic waste recyclers in its first two years.<sup>8</sup>
- New York’s Food Donation and Food Scraps Recycling Law caused **food donations to increase** by 60 percent and **food scrap recycling to increase** by 529 percent in its first year.<sup>9</sup>
- Vermont’s food diversion law started with the largest food waste generators in 2014, and expanded in 2020 to apply to all businesses, institutions, and residents. A statewide survey conducted in 2021-2022 found 40 percent of food businesses reported no impact on their operating costs and 28 percent reported that the law had a **positive impact on their operating costs**.<sup>10</sup>



Illinois should follow suit and pass its own food scraps diversion law.

## PRIORITIZING FOOD WASTE MANAGEMENT SOLUTIONS

There are far better places for food than in landfills—like on people’s plates—and a comprehensive food scrap diversion law would encourage better management of food before it goes to a bin. Food scraps and other organic materials should be managed in alignment with EPA’s Wasted Food Scale. The most preferred action is to **prevent** wasted food by producing, buying, and serving only what is needed. Any surplus food should be **donated** and redistributed to feed people or **upcycled** and made into a new food product. Farther along the scale is **feeding animals** or **leaving crops unharvested** so that fewer resources are added to the system. Next is **composting** or **anaerobic digestion with beneficial use** of digestate/biosolids so that the nutrients can return to the soil.<sup>11</sup> We want to avoid the remaining options to send down the drain, landfill, or incinerate with or without energy recovery. To maximize environmental, economic, and social benefits, these activities should be prioritized in the order given here. The most impactful state food scraps diversion laws incentivize waste reduction through preferred pathways before food becomes waste.



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Many sustainability-oriented businesses in Illinois already do what they can to prevent excess food waste, donate surplus, and compost food scraps; a statewide policy to keep food out of landfills would spur the rest of the state to follow their effective lead. Besides, Illinoisans already have been diverting leaves, grass clippings, and other landscape waste from landfills for more than 35 years. It would be prudent to extend this requirement to food scraps as well.

Studies show that the benefits of these statewide policies include job creation, the development of composting infrastructure, increased food donations, and emissions

reductions.<sup>12</sup> In fact, a recent study published in *Nature Food* found that comprehensive food waste recycling laws that enable food waste prevention, surplus donation, and food scrap composting in a holistic manner, including enforcement mechanisms, are essential for states to make significant progress toward our national goal to reduce food waste by 50 percent by 2030.<sup>13</sup>

Food isn’t garbage—surplus food belongs on plates and in bellies, and food scraps belong in compost. Illinois can help make that change.

### ENDNOTES

- 1 Illinois Environmental Protection Agency, “Food Waste,” accessed January 28, 2025, <https://epa.illinois.gov/topics/waste-management/materials-management/food-waste.html>.
- 2 ReFED, “Insights Engine,” last updated February 24, 2025, [https://insights-engine.refed.org/food-waste-monitor?break\\_by=destination&indicator=us-dollars-surplus&state=IL&view=detail&year=2023](https://insights-engine.refed.org/food-waste-monitor?break_by=destination&indicator=us-dollars-surplus&state=IL&view=detail&year=2023).
- 3 *Illinois Materials Management Advisory Committee Report to the General Assembly*, July 1, 2021, <https://epa.illinois.gov/content/dam/soi/en/web/epa/topics/waste-management/materials-management/documents/mmac-report-approved-7-1.pdf>.
- 4 Illinois Environmental Protection Agency, “Food Waste.”
- 5 Illinois Environmental Protection Agency, *Illinois Landfill Disposal Capacity Report*, July 2024, <https://epa.illinois.gov/content/dam/soi/en/web/epa/topics/waste-management/landfills/landfill-capacity/documents/landfill-capacity-report-2024.pdf>.
- 6 World Wildlife Fund, *Fighting Food Waste in Hotels*, 2017, [https://hotelkitchen.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/HotelKitchen\\_Final\\_Final\\_11102017.pdf](https://hotelkitchen.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/HotelKitchen_Final_Final_11102017.pdf).
- 7 CalRecycle, “California’s Climate Progress on SB 1383,” accessed June 16, 2025, <https://calrecycle.ca.gov/organics/slcp/progress/>.
- 8 ICF, *Massachusetts Commercial Food Waste Ban Economic Impact Analysis*, prepared for the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection, December 2016, <https://www.mass.gov/doc/massachusetts-commercial-food-waste-ban-economic-impact-analysis/download>.
- 9 New York Department of Environmental Conservation, “New York State Food Donation and Food Scraps Recycling Law: Summary of the 2023 Report to the Governor and Legislature,” July 2024, <https://dec.ny.gov/sites/default/files/2024-07/2023foodreportoverview.pdf>.
- 10 Vermont Department of Environmental Conservation, *2023 Vermont Waste Composition Study*, May 23, 2024, <https://dec.vermont.gov/sites/dec/files/wmp/SolidWaste/Documents/2023-VT-Waste-Composition-Study.pdf>.
- 11 See Darby Hoover, “Evaluating Anaerobic Digestion for Municipal Organics Recycling,” NRDC Expert Blog, May 30, 2023, <https://www.nrdc.org/bio/darby-hoover/evaluating-anaerobic-digestion-municipal-organics-recycling>.
- 12 Katie Sandson and Emily Broad Leib, *Bans and Beyond: Designing and Implementing Organic Waste Bans and Mandatory Organics Recycling Laws*, Food Law and Policy Clinic at Harvard Law School and Center for EcoTechnology, July 2019, [https://chlpi.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Organic-Waste-Bans\\_FINAL-compressed.pdf](https://chlpi.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/Organic-Waste-Bans_FINAL-compressed.pdf).
- 13 Sarah Kakadellis, et al., “State-Level Policies Alone Are Insufficient to Meet the Federal Food Waste Reduction Goal in the United States,” *Nature Food* 6 (February 2025): 196–204, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s43016-024-01092-w>.