

2025 Maine Wasted Food Solutions Summit

Friday, April 18, 2025

Chat Summary

Code: Q = question, MC = Mitchell Center, A = other answer, C = comment

Q. Can I get a list of actions and tasks to help increase the recycling of food waste in our communities?

MC. A few quick suggestions are things like: starting a recycling and/or waste committee in your town (or grow it, expand it, get more active!), think about creating a community food waste drop off collection program (see benefits in Mitchell Center intern presentation), connecting in with your local school as a hub for food waste diversion and sustainable education (see Mitchell Center interns talk later in session!)

Q. We've recently started a [community] composting bin. We want to educate and promote more of our 10,000 residents to use [it].

A. My 8 year old daughter came home from a school and demanded we start composting at home 😊 (and now we do!)

A. Lisbon has a composting Kiosk which is positioned just outside the Transfer station so no need for the transfer station to be open to use the compost bins. I use it in the winter when my personal compost bin is frozen and inaccessible due to snow.

A. How many bins? Have you found any best strategies for promoting across your community?

A. 3 green bins from Garbage to Garden. I have no info on how they are promoted, except that anyone going to the transfer station sees them on their way in.

A. We recently had 4, 7th grade classes come and tour our transfer station to help give us some ideas they think could help to increase our efforts to reduce food waste.

MC. As my colleague noted above, a great way to promote community composting is to bring wasted food and compost education into the elementary schools, so that students can bring the education home.

Q. The compost bin at the Orono community garden was discontinued, it was attracting too many rodents. Any advice on this?

A. What sort of bin was it? Did you bury wire mesh around it? Also, keeping the pile covered with a thick layer of brown material usually did the trick.

A. Reach out to Kate Garland the Master Gardener Volunteer Coordinator for that County, I believe that is an MGVS project and she may have some ideas as well. katherine.garland@maine.edu

MC. Vectors and smells are usually the #1 concern. Typically there can be a strategy to help mitigate. Sometimes it means having more cover (might slow the process), but the #1 rule of composting is if you wait long ...

Q. I am the kitchen manager at Oxford Hills Middle School - South, our 7th grade has spent the year learning, educating and putting solutions into place for us here at South, we have talked about starting composting, but the logistics are slowing us down on putting a program into place.

MC. There are a few great examples like Troy Howard Middle School or Massabesic Middle School that could be willing to share their strategies for how they got off the ground.

C. My 7th graders did a food waste audit, it was eye opening, I knew a lot of food is wasted, but their results surprised me.

C. A middle school science teacher in my community is taking the kids on a landfill tour, followed by watching "Just Eat It" on YouTube. The school is also planning to do a waste audit and are hoping to support a future food waste diversion effort.

A. That's great! Do they have any data they would be open to sharing on that?

A. I am sure, we are on April Vacation until the 28th but I will talk to Liz Cohen over vacation. Do you have contact info we could send it to?

A. Great - yes! My city email is atlarge2@cityofbath.com. Thank you!

MC. "Just Eat It" is a wonderful film and a better lifestyle. I saved a tray of Lobster Rolls from the trash for a catering event last week...not all heroes wear capes, some drive a Subaru (the speed limit) to get free food!

C. SeaShare (my org) is a part of ReFed—they have some great information and summits convening like-minded individuals in the food waste realm!

Q. I saw part of a program in Japan where vermi-composting was used for school food waste. Has anyone got experience with larger vermi-composting?

A. My attempts all required a lot more maintenance than regular composting! and when they are unbalanced they are a mess!

A. There's also bokashi composting, and I thought that was a lot more manageable, though you have to buy the grains.

A. There is also Clivus Multrum composting - Maine Huts and Trails uses in their composting toilets. Ask them for a tour! <https://www.clivusmultrum.com/science-technology.php>

Q. Can we get copies of the slides used during this summit?

MC. We are recording the Summit and the link will be available from the Summit webpage. As soon as we have permission from all the presenters, we will share the slides with the recording.

MC. You can email me at hallsworth@maine.edu

MC. We'll post the presentations to the Summit webpage following the summit.
<https://umaine.edu/mitchellcenter/2025-maine-wasted-food-solutions-summit/>

Q. Thank you for this meeting. Is there a data in terms of where we are losing the food most? In restaurants, markets or household use?

MC. Get excited for the next presentation! They are going over the recently published Maine Food Loss and Waste Generation Study!

A. Which is available online here:

https://www.maine.gov/dep/waste/publications/documents/ME%20DEP%20Food%20Loss%20and%20Waste%20Generation%20Study_RRS_4.1.29.pdf

Q. Since the study was done from December to April when many farms have less produce (not the growing season), how does that impact the data?

MC. They did the work between December and April. The study was wholistic for a typical year. Many of the estimates are based on metrics like "\$1000 revenue, # of employees, acres planted, etc." and using metrics and studies carried out across the US and globe.

MC. Even in cases where we were using actual farm data, we were asking farms for their annual data – not just the current month or months. So the timing of the study would have no impact on the accuracy of the data.

MC. It sounds like maybe proxy data was the only option. Is it correct that primary data was not able to be collected about what's left unharvested on farms?

Q. Has there been a study on the effectiveness of other state requirements? ie. VT

MC. If you mean the effectiveness of food waste bans – there is a study

<https://www.science.org/doi/10.1126/science.adn4216> which says that such bans are not effective.

But the study results are controversial and are disputed, as reported by NRDC and ReFED and other major wasted food experts - <https://www.nrdc.org/bio/darby-hoover/how-state-organic-waste-ban-policies-can-drive-food-waste-reduction>

Q. I am not sure how much an individual realizes the saved money [from reducing wasted food]? Averages are useful but if not realistic to people they will have indirect effects.

MC. We did a project with households to have them track and measure for a few weeks as well as we've done it with businesses. You are right, usually the best way to learn is to track for your home or business. The tally sheet is always insightful!

MC. This is why PAYT programs are so effective in reducing wasted food because you do feel the savings from waste reduction immediately because you do not need to use another expensive bag when you reduce or divert waste. Since food is the largest, wettest, and heaviest part of the waste stream, you would be able to save money using each bag longer, if you do not put food in the bag!

Q. What is the organization called that does the Dumpster Dives?

A. I believe it is called Food Waste Fiasco!

A. Here is the website! <https://www.robingreenfield.org/foodwaste/>

Q. Children eat snacks in school around 10 a.m. Lunch is served as early as 11:15. Guess who is not hungry for a full lunch? Parents need to keep snacks to a minimum—could schools address this issue.

Q. I have written to Dr. Glenn Cummings from the DOE Office of Innovation with a focus on sustainability in our schools. I have not heard back. I am wondering if there is a consistent mandated policy in place that schools must abide by. In my nearly 20 years as a staff member in multiple schools, I have been appalled at the perfectly good food tossed daily. At one time the recreation director was allowed to gather unopened food (milk, cheese sticks, fruit cups, etc) and offer it to the after school -program children. This was pulled and not allowed after a while. Why? And why must children take foods (milk, bananas, anything) that they KNOW they will not eat. It is just trashed.

A. I work with Glenn often (as does Susanne) and would be happy to help connect you. He is very responsive, but also incredibly busy. Do you want to email me at megan.mansfieldpryor@maine.gov? We can continue the conversation and loop Glenn in.

MC. These are great questions and concerns. You'll hear from William, a Mitchell Center Intern and Allison, a food and nutrition director about some of the challenges and achievements of a recent school food reduction study

A. Food share tables are allowed: <https://www.maine.gov/dhhs/mecdc/environmental-health/el/site-files/handouts/Food-Sharing-Tables-Guidance-for-Schools-052419.pdf>

Also, offer vs. serve is a great way to reduce school food waste:

[https://www.usda.gov/foodlossandwaste/schools#:~:text=Offer%2Dversus%2Dserve%20\(OVS,schools%20used%20OVS%20at%20lunch\).](https://www.usda.gov/foodlossandwaste/schools#:~:text=Offer%2Dversus%2Dserve%20(OVS,schools%20used%20OVS%20at%20lunch).)

A. I have gone to a Food Director in my town to ask what can be done. I feel that it is Paid personnel in schools that should be heading up programs to combat school waste—not private citizens volunteering their time outside their full-time jobs and home obligations.

A. I will address some of your questions during my presentation. Happy to connect offline if you have more questions surrounding what is served in schools.

A. We do have rules and regulations we have to abide by that are set by the USDA in regards to what we have to feed children, I agree the waste of fruit and vegetables is appalling, but it is a requirement for a reimbursable meal in our schools. We have a no thank you bin that my kids put things in they will not eat, (after they go through my line 😞) and then other kids have access to them. Last point, some schools also do share fridges to expand what can be saved and shared: <https://www.spsdme.org/article/2030446>

A. Oh yes—the famous food share tables. If uneaten food on the share table is not taken, then into the trash it went. The custodian was directed to do so. Now this was in 2019. Hoping things have changed, and that those foods can now be grabbed by the recreation director or a staff member. A No Thank You bin and share tables are great ideas, but they are worthless if they are not working as they should in our schools.

Q. Farms for Food Equity - Do you pay the seafood processor for handling your greens? Who supplies the baggies?

MC. This type of upcycled program is ideal because it uses food that would not have been harvested, as well as labor and factory capacity that might not have been used, to produce a market-ready item. So all the collaborators should be paid for their product or service – farmer is paid and packer who provides bags is paid.

C. In NM share tables are required as part of HUSM and we are working on some challenges related of when to toss items on share tables. Also, OVS is required for high school per USDA NSLP requirements.

Q. I am a ninth grader. My school has no system to reduce food waste. What would be the first step to to establish a food reduction system?

MC. First off, kudos on your interest. You're in luck! We have students working on a School Food Waste Toolkit. You'll see some info about that around 11:40.

C. Yes, absolutely schools can donate to food pantries and many do.

Q. How does the addition energy used for processing, packaging and delivering foods not typically used (like the broccoli stalks) to grocery stores factor into the equation? Is it more climate friendly than composting them?

MC. That's a great question. I am not sure what the answer is, but the guiding principle is the Food Waste Hierarchy that put "feeding people" above energy/nutrient recovery. You ask a great question. Source reduction is above BOTH of those choices...but a different decision matrix.

MC. For the farmer, using the vegetable trims and cast-offs is creating a new revenue stream while also feeding people which is important to sustain our farms and our people.

A. Using reusable food delivery packaging would reduce those emissions from food rescue even more. Generally, food has a big emissions impact and rescuing food for eating has a large emissions reduction when compared to composting or anaerobic digestion. Happy to find you some data to back this up if you want to reach out.

C. Recess before lunch at school can help students be hungrier to eat more of their food and drink more of their milk.

C. Yes, we are currently using Garbage to Garden. We did use Agri-cycle initially, but found Garbage to Garden to be more cost effective. We have also worked with local farmers to take food scrap, which was at no cost to us. Unfortunately the first farm we were working with was not consistent, so it was an unreliable option for us.

C. Our county food bank prepares surplus into individual meals. The truck the meals to communities like mine and sell them. For each meal purchased, one is donated. We pay \$6.00 each and have a monthly menu to choose from when we get the truck, so know when we want to get and buy some.

C. Replying to "broccoli stalks are really the most tasty part, im...": Rough chop of everything but the leaves (too bitter, even for me, and I'm not a PTC taster), dump on a cookie sheet, drizzle with olive oil (or whatever you like), broil or bake at high temp in over till crispy edges - maybe sprinkle with a little crunchy salt - yum!

Q. Have any states or municipalities passed laws requiring composting? It seems that legislation is often necessary to change behavior on a large scale. I've been impressed with how quickly Mainers have adapted to bringing their own bags to the grocery store.

MC. Yes, several states have implemented gradual food waste bans that have gotten down to residents. <https://www.partstown.com/about-us/food-waste-laws?srsId=AfmBOoqa3KvkePx8h-NxkJOh4jbKFqCSe6Jf-U8f408aFNyrJc40qzum>

MC. Materials for town composting are available here - <https://umaine.edu/foodrescuemaine/community-startup-guide/>

C. The Institute for Local Self-Reliance has a great map that show different policies related to composting across the country, as well as community composters: <https://ilsr.org/composting/map/>

Q. How many PT/FT staff work at the Readfield transfer station? Did you have to increase any staff hours or hire a new person in order to implement this program? Did you need any special permits for the compost program?

A. No additional staff /staff time were required and we have 2 FT and 1 PT staff. Truly a shift in work / job duties as opposed to added work. Because we were under the threshold and already composting leaf and yard waste we did not need any new permits.

MC. Depending on the size it will eventually need a permit. The best starting point is often working with a local farmer that can take up to 60 (yds...might be tons) per month with a management plan (less onerous than a permit).

Q. Were there any places (people, roles, etc.) where the transition was more difficult?

A. Not particularly, but it did take time to get full buy-in from one particular staff member but now he is fully on board.

Q. Eric, do you have a case study or other output that you will share to help other communities see how you made the shift?

A. Not yet, but this symposium is a good motivator to put something together!

Please contact us at foodrescuemaine@maine.edu or 207-581-3196 if you have questions or need more information.

