



# CET

# TIPS FOR WASTE REDUCTION AT SPECIAL EVENTS



For large indoor and outdoor events, such as conferences and fairs, there are numerous opportunities to reduce waste and ensure proper collection of recyclable and compostable materials. Here's how you, as an event organizer, can maximize waste diversion opportunities and develop clear communication between event staff, vendors, haulers, and attendees.

Contact CET at (888) 813-8552, [wastedfoodsolutions@cetonline.org](mailto:wastedfoodsolutions@cetonline.org), or fill out a [Wasted Food Assistance Web Form](#) for your next event.

## Planning for the Event

**Establish waste diversion goals** and communicate them in event advertising and to your vendors.

**Anticipate potential waste materials** from your event.

- Will food and/or beverages be served at your event?
- Will attendees receive paper handouts or giveaways?
- Will vendors bring additional materials or packaging during setup or breakdown?

**Conduct a site visit** and speak with key volunteers, custodial, and event staff to understand the anticipated collection, flow of materials, and hauling needs. If you do not own or manage the space, clarify event goals, waste sorting specifications, and responsibilities with the appropriate staff.

## Prioritize Waste Reduction

- Require food vendors to provide reusable serviceware instead of disposable.
- Purchase refreshments and other items with minimal packaging (avoid single-serving condiments).
- Avoid single-use plastic items such as straws, utensils, and plastic bags, or hand them out only upon request.
- Serve water in pitchers, dispensers, or portable fountains. Ask guests to bring reusable water bottles or provide reusable cups for attendees to either return or take home.
- Eliminate paper agendas, maps, or other handouts. If necessary, use post-consumer recycled content paper and print double-sided.
- Use reusable materials for name tags and signage. Collect them after the event.
- Develop a plan to ensure that surplus food is eaten! Coordinate in advance with a food rescue organization or local food pantry.

Refer to the [Source Reduction of Wasted Food Guidance](#) for more information on strategies for reducing wasted food.



## Hauler Communication & Services

Identify hauler(s) for different waste streams and discuss pickup needs.

Develop hauler contract(s) and adjust as necessary. CET has [guidance for businesses and institutions](#) to help set up, maintain, and adjust waste hauling contracts.

- Is this a one-time pickup for the event or part of an existing contract?
- Does your hauler collect recycling as dual-stream or single-stream?
- If collecting food scraps, does your hauler take them for composting, animal feed, or [anaerobic digestion](#)? This will dictate what materials can be accepted (e.g., compostable serveware, soiled paper products).

Clarify the equipment and signage provided by your hauler, such as outdoor carts or temporary dumpsters.

- If your hauler is not providing the containers you want at a sorting station, check with your Department of Public Works or Solid Waste Management District to see if they rent bins. For recurring events, consider investing in collection bins.

Determine what food and beverage containers you or your vendors should use. Choosing either recyclable or compostable – rather than offering both options – can reduce potential contamination and make sorting easier.

- Purchase containers in bulk to ensure uniform materials and bring down the cost for each vendor.
- Make sure compostableware has been certified by a third-party vendor (such as BPI certification) and using food and beverage containers that are acceptable in event recycling or composting streams.

## Reducing Contamination in Recycling & Compost

Refer to your hauler for a list of items that should be recycled and composted.

The following items are **typically** accepted for recycling:

- **Paper, cardboard, empty cans, glass, and plastic bottles, jars, and containers**

The following items are not typically accepted for recycling:

- **Utensils, plates, bowls, straws, stir sticks, and plastic cups\***
- **Liquids, food, and soiled items**

**Most compost sites accept paper napkins and paper towels along with food scraps, but only certain compost sites accept compostable plates, bowls, and cups, and they frequently have restrictions on the type or quantity of these materials. Never put compostable items in the recycling bin!**

**Confirm with your waste hauler before deciding on any type of disposable service ware.**

Consider setting up a 'back-of-house' sorting process or working with your venue to have materials sorted by a trained team to reduce contamination from the public sorting their own material.

# Working with Vendors

**Coordinate with your vendor(s)** to establish expectations and goals for waste diversion.

Provide details as early as possible and incorporate requirements into vendor contracts. Important information to convey includes:

- Instructions on how to participate in the recycling and food diversion programs during the event and what to do with packaging used to transport materials to event (e.g., pallets, boxes, film wrap).
- Acceptable materials/brands for food and beverage containers, as discussed with your hauler.
- Requirements for packing out additional waste after the event.

**Communicate headcounts** throughout the planning stages so food vendors can properly plan for and minimize overproduction.

Consider putting a clause into your contract with food vendors saying that only X% of over-prepped food is allowed.

Additionally, consider asking for prep with a reduced number: For example, if 100 people are anticipated (unless it's a sit-down meal), confirm meal prep for 90-95 people. This avoids overproduction.

**Encourage vendors to skip giveaways** or choose items that are easily reusable or recyclable.

## Staff Training & Education

Communicate with staff, including custodial staff, about proper waste diversion procedures for the event. Have a clear plan on how materials will be transported to pick-up locations, such as dumpsters or compactors.

Hold a pre-event training on waste diversion and sorting procedures for everyone working at the event. Show examples of the materials vendors are using and their proper bin for disposal.

Recruit waste station volunteers to assist attendees and vendors with the separation of materials.

Options for volunteer setup include:

- Position at least one volunteer at each waste station to monitor during the event and minimize contamination.
- Have volunteers circle multiple stations to observe and remove contaminants throughout the event.
- Volunteers conduct a full waste sort and audit after the event.

Create signage using graphics, text, and sample materials to indicate what goes in each bin and what does not. Include the specific materials at your event on these signs.

Plastic bags can be used to transport recyclables, but must be emptied at the recycling bin or cart. The bag can be reused or discarded as trash.





## At the Event

**Set up waste stations.** Group trash, recycling, and compost bins together in high-traffic or dining areas to minimize contamination. Consistency in arrangement, bin colors, and signage is key!

- Line all bins with color-coded bags to aid in proper separation. It is common to use black for trash, clear for recycling, and compostable/green for food scraps, depending on hauler preferences.
- Place signage above and on all visible sides of receptacles, as well as the top, if space permits.
- Provide gloves and grabbers at each station for volunteers to safely and easily retrieve contaminants from the bin.

**Monitor and empty** trash, recycling, and compost bins regularly throughout the event to minimize overfilling. Sort and remove contaminants as needed.

**Publicize recycling and composting** throughout the day with announcements and highlight vendor participation and support.

## What to Do with Leftover Food

**Instead of trashing extra unserved food, develop a plan to ensure that it is eaten!**

- **Offer leftovers to staff and volunteers:** save surplus food in a staging area, or offer to-go containers to bring food home.
- **Coordinate in advance with a food pantry or food rescue organization** to donate surplus food for the entire event. Inform vendors that this event-wide program is in place, and that a volunteer will come by at a certain time to pick up any leftovers.

Refer to the [CET Food Guidance Document](#) for more information on safe handling of surplus food and connecting with a food donation outlet.

## After the Event

- Identify opportunities for increased waste reduction, reuse, and recycling at future events.
- Ask for feedback from staff, volunteers, event attendees, vendors, and your hauler to improve waste diversion at your next event.
- Donate or recycle any surplus branded materials and giveaways.
- Ask for data from your hauler on waste diverted for recycling and composting. Share this info on social media and other post-event communications.

For additional assistance implementing a recycling or food scrap diversion program at your business or institution, please contact CET at (888) 813-8552, [wastedfoodsolutions@cetonline.org](mailto:wastedfoodsolutions@cetonline.org), or fill out the [Wasted Food Assistance Web Form](#).