

MassDEP Organics Subcommittee Meeting

April 10, 2025

Summary of Questions and Comments

Q: What is the source of the data that 21% of trash is organic material? Black Earth Compost has conducted an in-depth audit of residential trash that showed 47% organics.

A: This is based on 2022 waste characterization data gathered by an independent consultant at municipal waste combustion facilities using MassDEP approved methodology including an ASTM test method. This includes commercial and residential municipal solid waste. However, this 21% figure is for food material only. When all organic materials, including compostable paper, are included, the total is 37.8 %.

C: Another entity commented that the statewide characterizations show a relatively low percent of food waste because there is more recyclables in the trash overall in Massachusetts. If all entities recycled well, the percent of trash that is food waste would be much higher than 21%.

Q: Is the increase in anaerobic digestion (AD) and the drop in composting due to different levels of state funding support?

A: MassDEP gathered the following information relative to grants awarded for food waste diversion through the Recycling and Reuse Business Development Grants and loans awarded through the Recycling Loan Fund.

Recycling and Reuse Business Development Grants	
Category	Dollars Awarded
Collection	\$648,060
De-packaging	\$550,000
Composting	\$510,000
Anaerobic Digestion	\$380,000
Donation & Rescue	\$223,250

Recycling Loan Fund Loans	
Category	Amount of Loans
Anaerobic Digestion*	\$3,063,000
Composting**	\$2,884,000

Notes: * Some AD loans include de-packaging at AD operations. ** Some compost loans include collection activities.

C: MassDEP should develop guidance for both public and private entities on how to successfully develop composting and AD operations.

C: The timelines on the grants can be short to get a compost site funded. We had a \$400k grant from Mass DEP but lost it due to not getting the site up on time.

R: MassDEP responded that we are fortunate to be able to award grants across multiple state fiscal years, which enables us to fund capital projects. Our RBDG grants typically extend over 2-3 years. However it is unlikely that we can obligate grant funds for any longer than that.

C: As far as grant funding for municipalities, a municipality could apply for a SMRP grant to explore development of organics processing capacity. Grants up to \$250K avail: link for the grant is here. <https://www.mass.gov/how-to/apply-for-a-sustainable-materials-recovery-program-smrp-municipal-grant> This grant is now open and the deadline to apply is June 2.

C: Several participants raised concerns with co-digestion of food scraps at a wastewater treatment plant. These concerns focused on PFAS and other toxics in wastewater residuals and stated that this is just moving food scraps from one waste management system to another. This approach does not effectively capture and reuse soil nutrients like nitrogen, phosphorous and potassium. The total environmental benefits beyond mere diversion need to be considered. If we build a system of organics recycling back to agriculture that people can be proud of then it will lead to good participation.

C: The EPA did an interesting analysis on co-digestion that shares some of the benefits of using AD at Wastewater: <https://www.biocycle.net/food-waste-recycling-environmental-and-economic-assessment/>

C: We need to also consider and build up end markets for compost products

C: There is no one size fits all solution for food waste. In the Boston area, it is difficult to site composting operations and AD is the only viable option for some food waste generators. Some materials are better suited to go to composting, while others are a better fit for AD. We will need a suite of solutions to meet the needs and nuances of different communities and generators.

C: Other states have much more farmland than Massachusetts, which limits compost markets. California has 23% farmland, while Massachusetts has 7%.

C: Rhode Island has a policy that requires schools to donate food:

"It shall be the policy of the state, the department of education, and any educational entity to require that any request for proposal (RFP) to select a food service company (vendor) to provide food services to an educational entity shall require the vendor to donate any unserved nonperishable or unspoiled perishable food to local food banks or the Rhode Island Food Bank in accordance with the recommendations from the Rhode Island department of health "The Road to End Hunger" initiative.

Vendors required to donate nonperishable and unspoiled perishable food to local food banks or the Rhode Island Food Bank shall initially make arrangements for the provision accommodations necessary to carry out the provisions of this section.

Except for injury resulting from gross negligence or intentional misconduct in the preparation or handling of donated food, no educational entity, person, or vendor who or that donates food that is fit for human consumption at the time it was donated, as required by

subsection shall be liable for any damage or injury resulting from the consumption of the donated food.”

C: I and several others on the call attended the New York State Organics conference this week - there is so much opportunity for community scale composting in New York. Massachusetts can leverage this to consider community and regional scale composting. I will reiterate that compost use needs to be considered to close the loop on these efforts from all stakeholders.

C: It is very important to think of the compost end product use. Not only is composting diverting the material, but we are creating healthier ecosystems, communities, and can grow more food again with the very food waste that has been composted. It's the most natural cycle - it's been happening since the beginning of time. It's a win-win-win situation any way you think of it.

C: One way to phase in a residential food waste disposal ban is to start by requiring 10% of households in a community to be served. Then increase over time. This would be a great way to start without straining infrastructure and causing problems. Another attendee asked MassDEP to clarify that we're discussing a waste ban, as opposed to a requirement for a municipal collection program?

R: MassDEP responded that this is correct and that a waste disposal ban does not specifically require municipalities to establish collection programs.

Q: I get that DEP does not enforce at residential level, but wouldn't it make it easier for your team to enforce the Commercial Food Waste Ban?

A: Yes, having a food waste disposal ban with no threshold would make it simpler to conduct enforcement actions against businesses and institutions for disposal of food material.

C: A participants commented that food waste separation programs are more difficult to implement in higher grade levels. They suggested to start with elementary schools, then advance to middle schools and then to high schools. This would help ensure that students in higher grade levels are already familiar with food waste separation by the time they get to high school.

Other participants agreed with this comment and the greater challenges of implementing programs at the high school level.

C: MA DEP is leading the country, great work and looking forward to more of these!