




50 STATES, 50 FIXES

Care About Food Waste? In Massachusetts, You Can Be a Compost Consultant.

Heather Billings, food waste reduction consultant.

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America has a food waste problem: Rotten tomatoes and pizza boxes end up in trash dumps and produce a potent planet-heating gas called methane.

Massachusetts has a fix: A state regulation requires businesses to keep food out of dumpsters. To help them comply, the state offers a carrot, in the form of a chatty, practical, 63-year-old hand-holding food-waste-reduction consultant named Heather Billings.

Which is how, on a frigid Wednesday morning, Ms. Billings found herself poking around the narrow kitchen of the Port Tavern, a sports bar in Newburyport, Mass.





She quickly spotted a very solvable problem at the prep cook's station: a 23-gallon trash can into which went tomato tops and other food scraps.

Ms. Billings, a consultant contracted by the state government, took notes, snapped pictures and peered behind the bar to assess where the lemon wedges and plastic olive skewers ended up.

She had some easy fixes for Port Tavern's co-owner Abbie Hannan. She proposed inexpensive, four-gallon plastic buckets to nest inside the bigger trash bins to collect food scraps. She connected Ms. Hannan to compost haulers and a charity that could pick up leftover edible food.

"Our biggest challenge will be to get everyone to follow the rules," Ms. Hannan surmised.

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"A visual reminder is always good," Ms. Billings replied. She opened her binder to show signs that could be affixed to the kitchen walls.

State regulations require institutions that produce half a ton of waste per week — hospitals, universities, restaurants — to divert organic waste away from landfills and incinerators.

Many don't. Ms. Hannan hadn't heard of the food waste ban until she saw Ms. Billings give a presentation recently at a local event.

In theory, there's a stick for those that fail to comply. If state inspectors see large amounts of food waste being trucked into a waste site, they try to trace it back to where it's coming from. Enforcement is rare. In the last 10 years since the regulations have been in place, only 141 businesses have been cited for not

complying with the regulation; 14 consent orders have been issued, laying out what they should do. (State officials declined to let a reporter accompany an inspector or to interview one.)



Some food that's wasted is still good.



There are charities in the Boston area that take the surplus from restaurants and grocery stores.



Because, even as so much food goes to waste, many Americans are still hungry.

An [independent study published in the journal Science](#) concluded that among the half dozen states with composting laws, Massachusetts had gone farthest in reducing total waste in its landfills. Several experts [quibbled with that study](#), saying it had failed to break out how much of that waste reduction was organic matter. Sure, they said, Massachusetts had made a dent. But so had [California and Vermont](#).

Environmentalists want Massachusetts to go further, by requiring residents to also keep food waste out of landfills and requiring cities and towns to offer rat-proof compost bins. “We’re still throwing away a lot of food,” said Kirstie Pecci, who heads an advocacy group called Just Zero. “I’m frustrated by a lack of progress to get to the next level.”



State officials estimate that 380,000 tons of organic waste are diverted every year. That’s about 6 percent of the total waste generated, about 6.1 million tons annually.



One additional benefit of the food waste rule: It has spurred new businesses around the state, like Black Earth Compost.



So far, the state has relied mostly on carrots to nudge restaurants to compost. One of them is Ms. Billings.

Her passion for keeping useful things out of the trash goes back decades. She watched her father-in-law, a truck driver in Maine, haul newspapers for recycling. It led her to set up a neighborhood recycling center 35 years ago in her hometown, Fitchburg, Mass., and then work for a waste hauling company. She is now a senior waste reduction consultant for CET, formerly called the Center for EcoTechnology, a nonprofit group [contracted by the state](#) to help businesses comply with the regulation.

Her job, as she sees it, is to observe and advise. Do people who work in the kitchen have to travel far to dispose of compost? Are dumpsters clearly labeled so employees know what should go in them? Can restaurants save money by reducing their trash volumes? Is there enough organic waste to send to an anaerobic digester facility, where organic matter is turned into fuel?

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Ms. Billings inspected for food waste.

At Port Tavern, the trickiest problem stood in the parking lot. The bar shares the dumpster with three other restaurants. Only if everyone agrees to hire a compost hauler would they be able to reduce the trash they generate, and the cost of trash pickup.

“It’s complicated,” Ms. Hannan warned.

“Not insurmountable,” Ms. Billings replied, with her signature cheer. She would just have to do more hand-holding.