Organics Management Guide Submission

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Select the Primary Entity Type Please identify the category that best represents your project: Nonprofit or Non-Governmental Organization

Questions:

1. **Background: Provide context for the program, project, or policy — why it was developed, when it began, and the problem or opportunity it addresses.**

Western North Carolina faces two problems at the same time:

- households experiencing food insecurity—especially people with limited transportation, unstable housing, disability/health limitations, or disrupted kitchen access—and
- large quantities of surplus prepared food generated by hospitality, institutional, and event settings that becomes waste if it cannot be moved quickly and safely.

Food Connection was built to solve a specific gap within "organics management": most food recovery systems are optimized for shelf-stable groceries and raw ingredients, while chef-prepared meals are ultra-perishable and require a fast cold-chain, repacking workflows, and immediate distribution capacity. Food Connection's model rescues these time-sensitive meals and redistributes them rapidly to nourish people—keeping edible food at the top of the EPA Wasted Food Scale ("Donate") and away from disposal.

2. **Summary: Briefly describe the initiative, including its goals, location, and primary outcomes.**

Initiative: Prepared Meal Rescue + Last-Mile Distribution (Western North Carolina)

Food Connection's core innovation is upstream capture: we operate a logistics and cold-chain system designed to recover ultra-perishable prepared meals—one of the most time-

and temperature-sensitive categories in the food system. Rather than focusing only on redistribution, our model builds donor-ready collection through predictable pickup coordination, rapid chilling and repacking workflows, cold-chain transport, and documentation that makes prepared-food donation feasible for busy institutional kitchens. Distribution outcomes are the downstream proof that this collection system is working.

Primary outcomes (verified program scale):

- 2025 pounds of food rescued: 224,030
- 2024 pounds of food rescued: 186,575
- 2023 pounds of food rescued: 115,574

This represents 61% growth from 2023 to 2024, and an additional 20% growth from 2024 to 2025 — nearly 94% growth over two years.

In addition to tracking meals distributed, Food Connection measures collection capacity through active donor kitchens, weekly pickup routes, cold-chain handling compliance, and the proportion of recovered material that remains in human consumption. Growth in annual meal totals reflects increased upstream capture of edible prepared food that might otherwise enter disposal pathways.

Why it's a strong Wasted Food Scale case study:

EPA identifies donation as one of the "most preferred" pathways because it keeps food in the human food supply chain and avoids the environmental impacts of disposal. Food Connection operationalizes that principle for one of the hardest food categories to donate safely: chef-prepared meals with narrow time/temperature windows that require rapid cold-chain handling, staging, and distribution. While many donation systems focus on shelf-stable groceries, Food Connection specializes in preserving ultra-perishable prepared meals at scale, keeping edible food at the top of the Wasted Food Scale rather than allowing it to fall into lower-tier pathways.

Two brief "stories from the field" (direct partner voice):

At a recovery setting, the Lighthouse Recovery for Men manager shared that many residents arrive "fresh out of rehab…with nothing," and that the meals are "truly a blessing."

Providence House described Food Connection as "a Huge Boost in our ability to run a community meal and continue to support the community."

3. **Percent of Overall Diverted Material: If available, include data or estimates on the portion of the community or organization's total diverted material no longer associated with the waste stream that this program or policy addresses.**

Program-level proxy (Food Connection internal diversion):

Food Connection tracks diversion primarily through meals rescued and redistributed for human consumption. In full-year 2025, Food Connection distributed 224,030 prepared meals, representing edible food preserved in the human food supply chain rather than entering disposal pathways.

Food Connection also tracks limited non-donatable material routed to beneficial use. In 2025 reporting, compost and farm diversion combined totaled 1,357 lbs (926 lbs composted and 431 lbs donated to farms) when food was not appropriate for human consumption.

Using these tracked figures as a conservative program-level proxy for "diverted material managed" in 2025:

- Human consumption (meals distributed): 224,030
- Other beneficial uses (compost + farms): 1,357
- Total tracked (proxy): 224,030 + 1,357 = 225,387

Percent to human consumption: 224,030 ÷ 225,387 ≈ 99.4%

Percent to other beneficial uses: 1,357 ÷ 225,387 ≈ 0.6%

This demonstrates strong alignment with the EPA Wasted Food Scale: the overwhelming majority of food managed by Food Connection remains in the "Donate" tier, preserving edible food for people first, with compost or farm pathways used only when food is no longer suitable for donation.

4. **Key Program Elements or Policy Provisions: Describe the structure and main components of your program or policy. Explain the investments origins (who, how much). Please include as many of the following elements as applicable: What types of materials are being managed? (e.g., surplus recoverable foods, food scraps, wasted food. How are these materials managed? Who is responsible for managing them? (Organizations, agencies, businesses, or other entities) What products are generated, and how are they utilized or managed? (e.g., compost, animal feed, energy products) Who funds the management of**

these materials? (Funding sources, grants, partnerships) Who generates these materials? (Identify the origin: households, institutions, businesses, etc.)

Materials Managed

Primary: Surplus chef-prepared meals and prepared food suitable for human donation. In 2025, Food Connection redistributed 224,030 ready-to-heat meals, representing edible food preserved in the human food supply chain. Secondary: Limited non-donatable organic material routed to composting or farm donation when food is no longer appropriate for human consumption.

How Materials Are Managed (Structure)

Meals are picked up from hospitality, institutional, and event kitchens; rapidly chilled or maintained under cold-chain conditions; repacked and labeled; and delivered within 24–48 hours whenever feasible, reflecting the safety and quality needs of prepared food recovery.

Prepared food recovery differs from many donation models because of its narrow time and temperature windows. Food Connection maintains cold-chain procedures, staging workflows, and route coordination designed specifically for ultra-perishable meals. Freezing capacity is also used strategically for operational efficiency and surge management (for example, storing meals to maintain supply during weather disruptions or unexpected spikes in need).

Who Manages the Materials

Food Connection staff and trained volunteers coordinate donor pickups, cold-chain handling, repacking workflows, and last-mile deliveries through mobile routes and partner agencies. Distribution occurs through shelters, recovery programs, congregate meal sites, and community hubs serving neighbors with barriers to cooking, refrigeration, or transportation.

Products Generated and How They Are Used Ready-to-heat meals distributed through agencies and community sites for immediate human consumption (aligned with the “Donate” tier of the Wasted Food Scale).

A small subset of organics managed through composting or farm donation when not suitable for meal distribution.

Who Funds the Management

Management is supported through a mix of philanthropic grants, private foundation support, corporate partnerships, and operating revenue. Because the food itself is

donated, financial investment is concentrated in logistics, cold-chain infrastructure, labor, packaging, and transportation.

Who Generates the Materials

Prepared-food generators across hospitality and institutional settings, including hotels, conference centers, healthcare and institutional kitchens, seasonal camps, and event venues that produce safe surplus prepared meals.

5. **Regulatory Impact: Describe how laws, policies, regulations, and/or code have affected your program or project. This may include positive, negative, or neutral impacts. Consider noting which regulations apply, how they influenced implementation or operations, any challenges or barriers encountered, and how compliance requirements shaped program decisions.**

Food donation operates within a framework of food-safety standards and federal liability protections. The Bill Emerson Good Samaritan Food Donation Act and subsequent Food Donation Improvement Act provide foundational liability protections that make donation legally viable for food generators. For prepared meals specifically, operational compliance is shaped by time and temperature control requirements, safe handling documentation, and recipient capacity to receive and store meals appropriately. These regulatory and safety realities increase the importance of cold-chain infrastructure and clear partner protocols in order to scale donation effectively.

Local policy impacts: N/A (no specific local disposal bans or mandates are required for the model to function).

Operational compliance impacts: food-safety expectations increase the need for cold-chain capacity, standardized handling steps, and predictable distribution partners.

6. **Measurable Increase in Supply: Include data or qualitative outcomes showing growth in collection, diversion, or reuse volumes if available.**

Food Connection's tracked meal distribution has increased substantially over time, including major growth in the past two years:

- 2023: 115,574
- 2024: 186,575
- 2025: 224,030

Year-over-year growth:

- 2023 → 2024 increase: - 186,575 − 115,574 = 71,001 additional meals
    - 71,001 ÷ 115,574 ≈ 61% growth
- 2024 → 2025 increase: - 224,030 − 186,575 = 37,455 additional meals
    - 37,455 ÷ 186,575 ≈ 20% growth

Two-year cumulative growth (2023 → 2025):

- 224,030 − 115,574 = 108,456 additional meals
- 108,456 ÷ 115,574 ≈ 94% growth over two years

This nearly doubling of annual distribution reflects increased capacity to capture and safely manage edible prepared food that might otherwise have entered disposal pathways. Growth has been driven by expanded donor relationships, strengthened cold-chain workflows, and improved last-mile distribution coordination—allowing more surplus meals to remain in the human food supply chain rather than being landfilled or otherwise discarded.

7. **Behavior Change: Describe whether the initiative resulted in measurable behavior change and explain how you determined this. If behavior change occurred, outline the strategies that proved most effective. Please include any available data or evidence that supports your findings.**

Measured behavior change: N/A (not yet quantified through formal pre/post surveys of donors or residents).

Observed operational behavior change includes increased donor readiness to set aside and rapidly chill surplus prepared meals, more consistent pickup scheduling, and improved coordination between generators and recipient agencies. As collection systems stabilized, donors increasingly treated prepared-meal donation as a dependable pathway rather than a last-minute disposal alternative. On the recipient side, agencies adapted storage and service practices to better utilize prepared meals safely and consistently.

8. **Benefits and Impacts (Economic, Environmental, and Social): Describe the economic, environmental, and social sustainability impacts of the program, policy, or initiative. This may include both positive and negative outcomes. You may address impacts such as costs or savings, job creation, waste reduction, emissions, resource conservation, community engagement, equity, or public**

health. Please include data or qualitative observations where available and note any trade-offs or challenges.

Environmental impacts

Donation is among the most preferred pathways because it keeps food in the human supply chain and avoids disposal impacts. Food waste in landfills generates methane, a powerful greenhouse gas, and food has an outsized role in landfill methane emissions.

Food Connection reports environmental benefit estimates using EPA's WARM approach in prior work—for example, a documented estimate of ~706 tCO_2e avoided associated with 160,000 lbs diverted using an EPA WARM factor (as stated in program materials).

Social impacts

Food Connection's model delivers ready-to-heat meals, which can be critical for people who cannot reliably cook due to disability, unstable housing, disaster disruption, or recovery settings. Partner testimony reinforces that these meals meaningfully improve stability and service capacity.

Economic impacts -

- For recipient agencies, donated prepared meals can reduce food purchasing pressure and improve the consistency of community meals.
- For donors, a reliable donation pathway can reduce wasted-food handling/disposal burden (not yet quantified by Food Connection).

Trade-offs/challenges

Prepared food recovery requires higher food-safety controls and cold-chain infrastructure than many traditional donation models, making capacity constraints (space, refrigeration/freezer access, routing) a primary scaling limitation.

Food Connection is a donation-pathway system optimized for a hard-to-recover material stream: chef-prepared meals. By preserving ultra-perishable food within the human food supply chain, the program operates squarely within the most preferred tier of the Wasted Food Scale. Donation is not an afterthought within this model—it is the primary management pathway, with compost or farm diversion used only when food is no longer appropriate for human consumption.

9. **How Stakeholder Buy-In Was Achieved: Explain how the program gained support from key stakeholders (e.g., government agencies, businesses, residents, nonprofits).**

Food Connection's buy-in model centers on:

- Trust + reliability: consistent pickups/deliveries and predictable partner coordination.
- Food safety credibility: cold-chain timelines and standardized handling steps appropriate for prepared meals.
- Partner-centered fit: recipient agencies emphasize that prepared meals are uniquely useful in recovery, shelter, and community meal settings.

10. **Stakeholders' Perspectives and Dynamics at Play: Highlight collaboration dynamics, challenges, or differing stakeholder interests and how they were addressed.**

Key dynamic #1: Prepared-food donation is high-value, high-risk without infrastructure. Donors want surplus meals to nourish people, but they need fast, credible cold-chain logistics and clear handoffs. Food Connection functions as the "missing middle" between surplus generation and safe redistribution.

Key dynamic #2: What agencies can accept varies widely. Meal format, storage capacity, and staffing differ across shelters, recovery programs, and community meal sites—so Food Connection's coordination work reduces mismatch and waste.

Key dynamic #3: Disaster conditions intensify the need for ready-to-heat meals. When outages or displacement limit cooking and refrigeration, prepared meals become more essential—placing a premium on cold-chain resilience and distribution flexibility.

11. **Lessons Learned: Share what worked well, what didn't, and recommendations for others seeking to replicate your approach.**

- The top of the Wasted Food Scale requires infrastructure. Donation is highly preferred, but it is only achievable at scale for prepared food when cold-chain logistics and workflow capacity are strong.
- Freezer/cold storage capacity changes outcomes. Increased ability to store and deploy meals can reduce the need to purchase emergency food and stabilize supply during disruptions.

- Partner alignment matters as much as donor supply. The more structured the communication and expectations across partners, the less edible food is lost to timing/storage barriers.

Replication recommendation: Communities with strong hospitality/institutional food generation and rural access barriers can replicate this model by investing in (a) cold-chain assets, (b) rapid repack workflows, and (c) dependable last-mile partner networks—ensuring edible food stays in the “Donate” tier rather than dropping toward disposal. Investment in cold-chain assets and staging capacity directly increases upstream capture, reducing the likelihood that safe prepared food must be declined due to space, timing, or temperature constraints.