

## Organics Management Guide Submission

**Name:** Ashley Elzinga

**Title:** Director, Sustainability & Outreach, FPI

**Organization:** Foodservice Packaging Institute

**Email Address:** aelzinga@fpi.org

**Website:** recyclefsp.org | fpi.org

**Select the Primary Entity Type Please identify the category that best represents your project:** Other

**Other (please specify):** Trade Association of Brands and Manufacturers

### 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.**

The Compostable Chicago project was developed in 2022 to evaluate how the use of certified compostable foodservice packaging, when implemented under supportive operating conditions, influences front-of-house (FOH) food scrap capture and contamination levels. Many foodservice venues are rolling out organics collection programs, exploring compostable serviceware as a strategy to simplify sorting for patrons. At the same time, composters have concerns that the introduction of compostable packaging could increase contamination in organics streams.

The project was created to address two core questions:

- 1) Whether venues that thoroughly implement certified compostable foodservice items alongside best practices can minimize contamination in the FOH compost stream.
- 2) Whether extensive use of compostables correlates with increased capture of post-consumer food scraps. The goal was to develop a standardized, replicable methodology to evaluate these relationships and generate comparable data across multiple venue types.

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

Compostable Chicago was a collaborative research initiative that developed and piloted an innovative methodology to study the relationship between compostable foodservice packaging and FOH organics diversion performance. The project focused on foodservice venues with FOH compost collection and established a four-dimension evaluation framework covering procurement, operations, communications, and people, and paired this framework with detailed waste stream sorting protocols.

Primary outcomes included:

- A repeatable methodology for venue characterization and waste stream sampling
- A scoring rubric to assess implementation of compostable serviceware
- A standardized set of sort categories and data recording procedures
- A framework for correlation between implementation practices and diversion performance

The resulting guide provides a foundation for building multi-venue datasets that can better inform policy and industry best practices. The Compostable Chicago project report and guide methodology can be accessed at: [www.recyclefsp.org/compostable-chicago-form](http://www.recyclefsp.org/compostable-chicago-form)

**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.**

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- 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.)**
- What types of materials are being managed? (e.g., surplus recoverable foods, food scraps, wasted food. Post-consumer food scraps (FOH), pre-consumer food scraps (BOH), certified compostable foodservice packaging, recyclables and non-recyclable materials
  - How are these materials managed? Source separation of waste streams in FOH settings
  - Who is responsible for managing them? (Organizations, agencies, businesses, or other entities) Quick service and full-service restaurants, institutional, corporate, healthcare, and educational venues, kitchen ops, foodservice patrons, composters, public entities
  - What products are generated, and how are they utilized or managed? (e.g., compost, animal feed, energy products) Food scraps and certified compostable foodservice packaging from commercial foodservice venues
  - Who funds the management of these materials? (Funding sources, grants, partnerships) Operational budgets of foodservice and composting operators.
  - Who generates these materials? (Identify the origin: households, institutions, businesses, etc.) Primarily patrons in FOH settings at quick service and full-service restaurants, institutional foodservice venues, corporate, healthcare, and educational facilities, kitchen operations, composters, public entities, etc.
- 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.**

Various federal, state, and local solid waste and composting regs. Positive regulatory influences include state and municipal organics diversion mandates, commercial landfill bans, and local ZW goals. Challenges include compost facility access, composter acceptance policies, and variability in definitions of contamination, and differences in accepted materials from region to region. The methodology developed in the project is designed to be adaptable across regulatory contexts while utilizing standardized sort categories and scoring criteria.

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

The methodology measures measurable increases in organics capture via % increase in FOH food scrap capture relative to baseline, reduction in contamination percentage by weight and volume, and comparative performance can be seen between high-implementation and low-implementation venues. In the Chicago pilot, venues with higher levels of compostable implementation and strong operational controls showed higher food scrap capture rates and lower contamination compared to others. A key goal of the project is to promote long-term data aggregation that can further strengthen statistical confidence of the relationship across various types of venues.

**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.**

Behavior change and related impacts can be evaluated by strengthening the controls and practices outlined in the presented four-dimensional framework, and measuring outcomes through the developed standardized waste characterization methodology. Key indicators include an increased percentage of food scraps captured in the compost stream, a reduced presence of non-compostable plastics in compost, and improved sorting consistency over time.

Strategies for improved performance include clear, color-coded bin signage, exclusive use of certified compostable single-use serviceware in FOH settings, active staff monitoring of

waste stations, ongoing staff training, and visible labeling on compostable products. The four-dimensional framework enables observed improvements in diversion and contamination metrics to be directly linked to specific procurement, operational, communication, and staffing practices.

**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: Increased diversion of food waste from landfill, reduced GHGs; reduced contamination in compost streams; improved compost product quality with positive equity and public health impacts; support for more circular material flows

Economic: Reduced risk of rejected loads at compost facilities; potential hauling cost optimization; support for data-driven decisions for foodservice item procurement; reduced operational costs at compost facilities

Social: increased customer engagement in sustainability practices; staff education and training; support for municipal zero waste goals; the compostable Chicago project advances broader organics management best practices for foodservice

Trade-offs may include increased procurement costs for compostable serviceware and additional operational oversight requirements for operators compared to the baseline, but full accounting should consider the externalities associated with baseline behavior.

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

Buy-in was achieved through collaborative sponsorship and input from industry and nonprofit partners across composters, sustainable packaging stakeholders, circular economy subject matter experts and foodservice operators. Stakeholders were engaged early in the methodology development process and throughout the project to ensure practicality, various points of view and technical credibility.

The four pilots articulated mutual benefits for stakeholders, including foodservice operators and composters. The project prioritized the development of a transparent, repeatable methodology and standardized data collection. Participating venues were offered detailed feedback and performance insights.

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

The Compostable Chicago project intentionally brought together stakeholders with distinct shared, and sometimes competing, priorities. Compost manufacturers have a need for low contamination thresholds to protect finished compost quality and marketability, while foodservice operators need simple, cost-effective, and easy systems for patrons to follow. Other sponsors include packaging manufacturers and compostable packaging certification bodies focused on ensuring that certified compostable products perform as intended within real-world composting systems.

Municipal/regional stakeholders had special interest in scalable strategies to increase diversion while maintaining operational reliability. Differing perspectives created productive dialogue around issues such as acceptable practices, contamination levels, product substitution, staffing and behavioral dynamics, and procurement consistency. The project team addressed these dynamics by grounding discussions in standardized data collection and transparent scoring criteria, enabling stakeholders to evaluate performance based on measurable outcomes.

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

The Compostable Chicago project demonstrated that compostable foodservice items contribute to improved diversion performance in FOH settings, but the operating conditions significantly influence the outcomes. Consistent procurement practices reduce sorting confusion and support cleaner organics streams. Ongoing staff training and active stream monitoring influence contamination rates. Clear patron-facing messaging is particularly needed in high-turnover environments where users may have limited familiarity with sorting expectations.

Project challenges primarily revolved around operational issues, such as occasional procurement substitutions (e.g., a supplier replacing a PET lid with a PLA lid) and isolated

errors in waste stream labeling. These errors necessitated real-time clarification and interpretation by the project team during sorting and analysis.

The project was a great success, resulting in clear and standardized characterization and scoring methodologies that enable meaningful comparisons across venues and promote the development of a robust dataset over time. Future replication efforts should carefully read and follow the provided guide methodology. Prioritize a variety of venue types while strictly adhering to consistent sampling and evaluation protocols.