

FOOD WASTE INITIATIVE  
RESEARCH BRIEF SERIES



State and City Food Waste Reduction Goals:  
Context, Best Practices, and Precedents

JANUARY 2024

## Acknowledgements

This document was prepared by the Environmental Law Institute (ELI). ELI Visiting Scholar Carol Adaire Jones authored this brief.

## About ELI

The Environmental Law Institute makes law work for people, places, and the planet. Since 1969, ELI has played a pivotal role in shaping the fields of environmental law, policy, and management, domestically and abroad. We are an internationally recognized, non-partisan publishing, research, and education center working to strengthen environmental protection by improving law and governance worldwide.

## ELI's Food Waste Initiative & Research Brief Series

ELI's Food Waste Initiative conducts research and works with stakeholders to prevent food waste, increase surplus food donation, and recycle the remaining food scraps. The Initiative aims to help stakeholders meet the U.S. food loss and waste goals by designing and implementing public policies and public-private initiatives to prevent food waste, increase donations of surplus food, and expand food scrap recycling. To learn more about the Initiative's work, visit: <https://www.eli.org/food-waste-initiative/>.

ELI's Food Waste Initiative is publishing a Research Brief Series to present takeaways from the Initiative's research, spanning a range of topics important to food waste prevention, recovery, and recycling. To access other research briefs in the series, visit: <https://www.eli.org/food-waste-initiative/publications>.



Environmental Law Institute (2024). State and City Food Waste Reduction Goals: Context, Best Practices, and Precedents. © 2024 Environmental Law Institute®, Washington, D.C.

# State and City Food Waste Reduction Goals: Context, Best Practices, and Precedents

## Context

On September 16, 2015, the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) and EPA announced the [U.S. 2030 Food Loss and Waste Reduction goal](#), the first-ever domestic goal to reduce food loss and waste. The goal seeks to cut food loss and waste in half by the year 2030. In September 2021, EPA changed the target measure used for the baseline, in order to align the U.S. 2030 goal with the [United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals \(SDGs\) Target 12.3](#). Previously, EPA had defined the measure of food waste to be reduced as the quantity disposed through landfill or controlled combustion: in other words, recycling was considered a strategy for food waste reduction, along with prevention (source reduction) and recovery for donation. As of September 2021, EPA changed the baseline so that only prevention and recovery for donation are to be counted. *(Note: The change is quite recent, and most of the state and local governments that have adopted reduction targets appear to include all three solutions to achieve their reductions in total food waste.)*

The Zero Food Waste Coalition and other food waste experts and advocates have recommended establishing food waste reduction goals at the city or state level, as a useful policy tool for achieving the U.S. goal of 50% reduction by 2030.<sup>1</sup> The targets may be introduced as part of the commitments made in a local or state Climate Action Plan, Zero Waste/Solid Waste Plan, or as a part of a stand-alone Food Waste Reduction Plan.

## Best Practices

In its recently released [State Policy Toolkit](#), the Zero Food Waste Coalition identifies several features exemplifying best practices for setting targets:

- mandate the plan via legislation rather than executive order to better ensure permanence;
- feature specific targets and goals;
- require periodic updates to stay current; and
- outline concrete actions and identify an agency that is accountable for implementation.

To address the last point, the State Policy Toolkit recommends a number of other tested policies and programs to promote food waste reduction, including:

- food waste diversion mandates (or landfill bans) and related policies;
- liability protections, tax incentives, and food safety guidance for food donation;

---

<sup>1</sup> Founding supporters of the Zero Food Waste Coalition are [NRDC](#), [WWF](#), [Harvard Food Law Policy Clinic](#), and [ReFED](#). See, for example, Zero Food Waste Coalition's [Achieving Zero Food Waste: A State Policy Toolkit](#) and NRDC's [Tackling Food Waste in Cities: A Policy and Program Toolkit](#).

- permitting, zoning, and animal feed regulations supporting organic waste processing infrastructure;
- promotion of end-markets for compost;
- improved date labeling and public education designed to prevent upstream food waste; and
- other support for reductions through grants, technical assistance, public recognition, and public awareness campaigns.

Below we identify selected states and cities that have established food waste reduction goals, the legal documents establishing the goals, and the key documents created for planning how to accomplish them.

### State Level Precedents

- **California:** In September 2016, Governor Edmund Brown Jr. set methane emissions reduction targets for California ([SB 1383 Lara, Chapter 395, Statutes of 2016](#)) in a statewide effort to reduce emissions of short-lived climate pollutants (SLCP). The food waste targets are:
  - to reduce organic waste disposal 75% by 2025; and
  - to rescue at least 20% of currently disposed surplus food for people to eat by 2025.

California has very extensive policies and programs, outlined in [its website](#).

- **Washington State:** In 2019, the Washington State Legislature unanimously declared statewide food waste reduction goals ([RCW 70A.205.715](#)), which are:
  - to reduce food waste generated by 50% by 2030, and
  - to reduce at least half of edible food waste by 2030.

The State developed the [Use Food Well Washington Plan \(UFWW Plan\)](#) to provide a roadmap. In 2022, the governor signed state bill [HB 1799](#), which sets as targets (relative to a 2015 baseline):

- to reduce organic waste disposal 75% by 2030; and
- to recover for human consumption no less than 20% of the volume of edible food that was disposed of as of 2015 by 2025.

*(The bill defines organic waste as manure, yard debris, food waste, food processing waste, wood waste, and garden waste.)*

- **Oregon:** The Oregon Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) released in 2017 its first [Strategy for Preventing the Wasting of Food](#), providing a 5-year plan to support the state's food waste goals of reducing the generation of wasted uneaten food by 15% by 2025, and 40% by 2050, articulated in the [Materials Management in Oregon: 2050 Vision](#). The document placed a strong emphasis on prevention, distinguishing it from rescue/donation and recycling.

In March 2020, the governor of Oregon issued [Executive Order 20-04](#) on climate change that directed the Oregon ECG and DEQ to take actions necessary to prevent and recover food waste, with the goal of reducing food waste by 50% by 2030, as one of a variety of state actions mandated to reduce GHG emissions. Following the executive order, DEQ published in May 2020 a new [Preliminary Work Plan to Reduce Food Waste](#), which includes convening a collaborative effort to develop a Phase Two Food Waste Strategy. To achieve the 50% reduction, DEQ concluded it would need to draw on recycling, as well as prevention and donation actions.

- **New Jersey:** [P.L. 2017, c. 136 \(S3027\)](#), signed into law on July 21, 2017, established a goal of reducing food waste by 50% by the year 2030, relative to a 2017 food waste baseline. This bill tasked the New Jersey Department of Environmental Protection, in consultation with the State’s Department of Agriculture, to develop and commence implementation of a plan that will guide the state to achieve the food waste reduction goal. The [draft plan](#) highlights the issues of wasted food and possible short- and long-term actions that can be implemented.

### City Level Precedents

- **Denver, CO:** In the [Denver Food Vision](#) (2017), a vision and action plan designed to achieve an inclusive, healthy, vibrant, and resilient food system, the city committed to a 57% reduction in food waste by 2030, along with a number of other goals.
- **Baltimore, MD:** The city adopted the goal of 50% reduction in food waste by 2030, as part of the [2019 Baltimore Sustainability Plan](#). The Baltimore [Food Waste and Recovery Strategy](#) also sets goals of higher levels of reductions to be achieved by 2040.
- **Washington, D.C.:** The city is a [C40 city](#) and signatory of the [Advancing Towards Zero Waste Declaration](#), which means the district has committed to specific goals in efforts to implement zero waste. In its [Sustainable DC Plan](#), DC has set the deadline of 2032 to reduce food waste by 60% compared to 2015.<sup>2</sup>
- **Nashville, TN:** In August 2023, the city adopted a [resolution](#) supporting municipal leadership on food waste reduction and encouraging a Metropolitan Government and community-wide target of a 50% reduction in food waste from 2017 levels by 2030.

**For more information about this Research Brief, please contact: Carol Adaire Jones, [caroljones@rcn.com](mailto:caroljones@rcn.com).**

---

<sup>2</sup> Other goals include: reduce per-capita waste generation by 15% compared to 2015; reuse 20% of all waste produced in the District; and achieve 80% waste diversion without landfill, waste-to-energy facilities, or incinerators.



ENVIRONMENTAL  
LAW • INSTITUTE®

1730 M Street, NW, Suite 700

Washington, DC 20036

Tel: 202.939.3800

Fax: 202.939.3868

[www.eli.org](http://www.eli.org)