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Household waste, particularly food, piles up over the holidays

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SALT LAKE CITY — The excesses of the holiday season not only sneak up on the waistline or drain the pocketbook, they carve out space at local landfills.

Old toys replaced by the new. Boxes upon boxes. Food scraps from overflowing dinner plates or leftover potatoes that get old enough to raise the specter of food poisoning.

A report by an independent research organization based in Washington, D.C., says Americans generate an extra 5 million tons of household waste each year between Thanksgiving and New Year's, including three times as much food waste as other times of the year.



Ravell Call, Deseret News

Bob Harmon, left, vice president for the customer for Harmons, and Kirk Kesler of the Utah Food Bank, box up food that is approaching its expiration date for distribution to the poor, Tuesday, Dec. 20, 2011, in West Valley City. This particular box of food still needed to be frozen and would be taken to the Utah Food Bank at a later date.

The study by [Worldwatch Institute](#) — which tracks energy, resource and environmental issues — says that one-third of food produced worldwide for human consumption, or an estimated 1.3 billion tons, is lost or wasted each year.

"I am not surprised that there is so much waste. It's part of our culture," said Nate Call, a food resource specialist with the Utah Food Bank. "We get whatever we can, whenever we can and discard it later if we do not need it or use it."

A number of businesses and organizations in Utah are taking steps to do what is possible to decrease what would ultimately end up in the garbage. In many instances, otherwise landfill-destined products take on a new purpose, helping recipients

and cutting costs for those who would have thrown it away.

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Many restaurants, for example, compost food products on site or sell them for composting. Old cooking grease is bought by the barrel to turn into ethanol.

"Many of the restaurants are of the nature that they are recycling these things — and that helps the recyclers make their money," said Melva Sine, president and chief executive officer of the Utah Restaurant Association.

Sine said the move to composting food scraps or disposing of grease for fuel has been gaining traction in Utah for some time.

"Environmentally, it is the right thing to do. At the same time, it is smart business because the waste that is being produced is being purchased for other things."

Sine said the food service component of Deer Valley Resort has long made it a practice to be as eco-friendly as possible with its waste. As an example, extra bread goes to an area Christian center for needy families and at one point, table scraps from the restaurants provided food fare for a herd of goats.

Since 2006, the Utah Food Bank has operated the grocery rescue program, a partnership that taps participation from stores across Utah — from rural Blanding to Salt Lake City.

The program retrieves meat, dairy, bread and produce products that are nearing their end-of-freshness dates. It also includes products such as shampoo or lotions that the stores need to cycle off the shelves.

By the latter part of 2006, Call said the program had collected more than 300,000 pounds of goods from 14 participating stores.

With 200 stores part of the program now, Call said grocery rescue is on target to collect as much as 11.5 million pounds of goods this year.

Those products, picked up six days a week from participating stores under a strict formula to protect end consumers, are then distributed via the Utah Food Bank's network of recipient agencies — more than 130 throughout the state.

The beauty of the program, Call adds, is that the food and other products are put to good use, stay out of the landfill and help keep costs down for grocery stores.

"It saves not only the food, but there is the additional cost savings to the store for waste disposal," he said. "The average cost per 10-ton load of that food waste is about \$400."

Bob Harmon, vice president for the customer at Harmons, said grocery rescue helped the company shuttle 146,000 pounds of food from the chain to area food banks or other distributors.

"We have tried to do what we can to minimize waste," he said, adding that the program not only has benefits for its charitable aspects, but for its environmentally friendly nature.

"These products are going to use, rather than to the landfill as waste," he said. "We are very supportive of this program."

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Reducing food waste

Here are some hints from Worldwatch Institute to help reduce food waste during the holidays:

1. Be realistic. Fear of not providing enough food causes hosts to cook too much. Portion planning is available at www.lovefoodhatewaste.com.
2. Plan ahead by creating a shopping list to avoid impulse buying or unnecessary quantities.
3. During the meal, control the amount on your plate to control what is going in the garbage by using smaller plates.
4. Encourage self-serve with guests, allowing them to choose what and how much they want to eat.
5. Store leftovers safely. Hot foods should not be left out more than two hours and package leftovers in smaller individually sized containers so they are more convenient for a quick meal.
6. Compost food scraps. Instead of throwing out the vegetable peels, eggshells and other food scraps from making your meal, consider composting them. Individual composting systems can be relatively easy and inexpensive, and provide quality inputs for garden soils.
7. Create new meals out of "scraps" such as turkey carcasses or vegetables for soups or stock.
8. Donate excess. Food banks and shelters gladly welcome donations of canned and dried foods, especially during the holiday season and colder months.