



Contamination in Food Scraps Bins

Troubleshooting Guide for Food Retail and Food Service Managers

About this Guide

Think of this resource as a troubleshooting guide for anyone—such as a manager or a supervisor—who oversees a food waste diversion program and is looking to address contamination (gloves, plastic, etc.) in the food scraps collection bin. *This is not a guide for starting a food waste diversion program or how best to source-separate.* **We are assuming you already have an established program and are seeking tools to reduce the number of gloves, plastic wrap and hairnets (i.e., contamination) that find their way into your food scraps collection bins.** If you don't have a program and are looking for guidance, take a look at this [Food Donation and Food Scraps Recycling Law: Guidance for New York State Businesses](#) from the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation.

Not all contamination has the same underlying cause. Without understanding why the contamination is occurring, you may implement some changes with little to no effect. This resource is designed to help you identify solutions or appropriate corrective actions based on the type of contamination (e.g., hairnets in the food scraps collection bin).

Also available with this guide is a **poster** that can be displayed for staff. The poster allows you to quickly and efficiently obtain input on where and when contamination is occurring. Using both the guide and the poster is best, but either can be used alone. The poster highlights key reminders for being proactive about reducing contamination. It also features write-in areas where staff members can note details about contamination when it happens, such as the location and time of an incident. Tracking contamination events and making sure staff members know why they happened and what is being done to prevent them from recurring will be essential to the long-term success of your food scraps recycling program.

How this troubleshooting guide is organized

The guide lists potential reasons (causes) and opportunities for addressing the contamination and is organized into four major categories: **materials**, **environment**, **people**, and **processes**. Since you don't have as much influence over your customers' behavior as your staff's when it comes to food scraps, **customer-facing** bin contamination has its own section at the end of this guide. Corrective actions that can be used to address more than one cause are listed under multiple categories.



What is Food Scrap Bin Contamination and Why it Matters

Contamination is material in your food scraps or compost bin that your recycler cannot accept because it affects the quality of their product.

These could be gloves, hairnets, plastic cups, straws, fruit stickers and sometimes even compostable service-ware. In severe cases, contamination that is not dealt with can lead to failed food scraps recycling programs, as a hauler may stop accepting the food scraps you collect. In addition to keeping your food scraps recycling program going strong, **keeping contamination low also has environmental and cost benefits**, too. Materials collected in your food scraps recycling program are often sent to a compost facility to be recycled. Contamination can cause chemicals found on packaging, microplastics, and other inert materials to be incorporated into the compost product and ultimately the soil, potentially ending up in our waterways and food supplies. Also, when contamination such as glass and stretch wrap make their way to the compost facility, they can damage equipment and cause increased processing time to remove from the food scraps. The costs incurred by your hauler/recycler for removing contamination are oftentimes passed down to you through fees or increased subscription costs. If the cost of contamination removal is too high, loads of food waste may sometimes be rejected at the compost site and subsequently landfilled or incinerated.

Keys to Managing Contamination

Contamination happens—and that's OK!

Even businesses with excellent food scraps collection programs in place will experience bin contamination. With this in mind, you should know what to do when it happens. Even though it is valuable to recognize that problems will occur, it is still important to maintain food scraps collection bins that are as free of contamination as possible. There are many reasons that a food scraps collection bin gets contaminated—the better you understand these causes, the better your chances of finding solution(s) that stick.

Put what you learn into action.

Don't leave your staff out of the decision-making process. They have the ability to contribute valuable, on-the-ground insights that could lead to more effective solutions. Likewise, spend some time in the areas of your facility where the food scraps collection bins are located and contamination is occurring. You might discover something that your staff did not see.

Sometimes the root cause of contamination will not be obvious at first. In this case, be prepared to try a series of corrective actions. The first actions tackled should be the least cost, the easiest to implement, and/or are similar to other measures already being implemented. Actions that require more effort or money do not need to be used unless and until absolutely necessary. Your goal is to work through the actions until you notice a difference in contamination levels and reach the level needed by your recycler.



Stop, look, and listen.

When bin contamination is discovered, don't jump to conclusions as to why it occurred. Instead, take the time to do some investigation: What is the contamination? Where did it happen? How did it end up in the bin? Why? With this information in hand, you'll be better able to identify appropriate solution(s).

When you are just getting started, keep in mind that new habits take time to form, so try to avoid overreacting (that something has gone wrong) and overcorrecting (with significant process changes) if you see contamination in the first few weeks or months. Instead, actions such as adding prompts, signs, reminders, trainings and/or audits can help staff members adapt to using the new food scraps collection bins.

It's important to recognize the pivotal role your staff play in troubleshooting contamination and ensuring success of your program. Staff members not only should be a part of the process to identify solutions whenever possible but also be aware of the program accomplishments, e.g., days without contamination or number of pounds of food waste diverted from landfill. It is also helpful to explain how important being contamination-free is to the food scraps recycling facility to ensure they can make a clean, safe product.

Your food scraps hauler may also be a great resource for tips on getting started and working through challenges that emerge, since they handle food waste every day and probably have worked with a number of businesses like yours already.

Correct course and move forward.

Remember: Your food scraps collection program should adapt and evolve over time. Follow through on the solutions you develop – stay involved until it is clear the implemented change is effective and has taken hold. As you make changes over the life of your program, be sure to update any relevant procedures or training protocols, and to communicate those updates to current staff.

To know if you've improved as a result of a change, you also need to know where you started. Don't wait for contamination to happen—periodically take the pulse of how the program is doing by spot-checking bins, performing short audits, and other basic performance assessments. Regular check-ins and other data collection measures like these will help you set baseline and measure improvement.

Contamination Causes and Corrections

When contamination happens, use the information that follows to look up the main category and potential causes based on the specific circumstances of the observed contamination – **people, materials, environment, processes and customers**. Narrow down the list of causes and subsequent solution(s) through process observation, engagement with employees and/or working with your hauler. Implement appropriate corrective action(s), update your procedures, communicate with staff, and monitor progress.



**Staff-Related
Contamination**



**Materials-
Management-
Related
Contamination**



**Workplace-
Environment-
Related
Contamination**



**Workplace-
Practices-
Related
Contamination**



**Customer-
Related
Contamination**

Staff-Related Contamination

(Employees, management, vendors, and others who are involved in business operations—but not customers)

Contamination Causes

Some staff members see **separation as unimportant**.

Some of the **influential staff members are not supportive of the program** and others are following their lead.

There is **conflict amongst staff about where the bins should be located**.

Certain **staff members do not want to handle customer food waste**.

Corrective Actions

Maintain a program board with goals and purpose that is visible to everyone.

Incentivize staff to identify opportunities—have a public board where employees can post ideas.

Celebrate small and large victories with staff on an ongoing basis.

Reinforce the importance of the program routinely in conversation and staff huddles.

Tape off floor (or shelf) space where the bins belong so that it is always apparent where each should be placed.

If multiple people have different feelings about where the bins should reside, work with the group to find a compromise on location.

Utilize staff who routinely handle food waste—add tasks related to food waste and separation part of their overall responsibilities.

Provide staff with gloves and other sanitary products that they can use when handling food waste.

Staff-Related Contamination cont.

(Employees, management, vendors, and others who are involved in business operations—but not customers)

Contamination Causes

The **separation process has not become habit** for some staff members.

Staff members **do not remember what belongs in each bin.**

All staff members **have not been trained.**

There is **confusion about what belongs in each bin.**

Corrective Actions

Reinforce the importance of the program routinely in conversation and staff huddles.

Retrain; discuss with staff on how to improve (via training, signage, etc.) if necessary.

Improve bin signage visibility, graphics, imagery, and/or specificity.

Update procedures and onboarding material for new staff members.

Translate bin signage and other training materials into additional languages.

Update the color or size of bins for food scraps collection, trash, and recycling so that they are consistent and distinct from each other—work with hauler(s) for suggestions.

Materials-Management-Related Contamination

(Bins, food, packaging, and other stuff used to manage food scraps)

Contamination Causes

Some of the **compostable and non-compostable packaging or service-ware** look similar.

Food waste and packaging are too difficult to completely separate.

There are **too many sources of contamination** (plastic silverware, food packaging, gloves, etc.), which **makes it hard to separate** them from the food scraps.

The **trash and food scraps collection bins look the same**, so staff sometimes use the wrong bin.

The **trash bins fill up too quickly**, so staff use food scraps collection bins instead.

Corrective Actions

Update service-ware so that compostable and non-compostable versions are distinct from each other, or switch to only reusable or only compostable.

Reduce sources of contamination (e.g., condiment cups, straws or take-out cups).

Identify and resolve unrelated areas of inefficiency to allow staff more time to separate.

Add magnetic screen to catch flatware that is accidentally put into the food scraps collection bin.

Improve bin signage visibility, graphics, imagery, and/or specificity.

Add additional prompts or visual indicators, such as distinguishable bin lids, stickers, or more distinct receptacles for each waste stream.

Update the color or size of bins for food scraps, trash, and recycling so that they are consistent and distinct from each other — work with hauler(s) for suggestions.

Reduce trash generation.

Work with hauler to find the right-sized bins, add additional bins to kitchen area, or increase frequency of pick-ups.

Update frequency of how often bins are emptied.

Workplace-Environment-Related Contamination

(The area(s) where staff members work and the time required to do relevant tasks)

Corrective Actions

Contamination Causes

The **separation area is crowded**, forcing staff to rush through the separation process.

Staff are too busy to separate during peak times.

A **trash or recycling bin is too far away**, so it is easier for staff to use one bin for all waste.

An area's dedicated trash or recycling bin was moved or removed and not replaced, so **staff use the wrong bin**.

Move bins to a less congested area.

Reorganize congested areas so it is easier to sort and dispose of waste streams properly.

Use smaller bins in the congested area that can be changed out more frequently to alleviate the space constraints.

Reduce sources of contamination (e.g., condiment cups, straws, or take-out cups).

Re-balance job responsibilities across staff to reduce burden on certain staff that are overwhelmed by additional separation requirements.

Identify and resolve unrelated areas of inefficiency to allow staff to feel less rushed.

Move trash and food scraps collection bins closer together and nearer to where waste is generated. This may require the acquisition of additional bins.

Include staff responsibility for replacing food scrap bins in program procedures.

If multiple people have different feelings about where the bins should reside, work with the group to find a compromise on location.

Retrain; discuss with staff on how to improve (via training, signage, etc.) if necessary.

Tape off floor (or shelf) space where the bins belong so that it is always apparent where each should be placed.

Workplace-Practices-Related Contamination

(How tasks related to your food waste diversion program are done)

Contamination Causes

There is **no signage** posted alongside bins **or existing signs are unclear**.

Staff members find that **instructions for separating are unclear**.

Some **procedures have not been updated to reflect the new processes**, including staff members responsible for carrying out processes (e.g., bin cleaning, how to separate food scraps from trash, etc.).

Staff members are receiving (or perceive to be receiving) **mixed messages from management**.

Pre-existing processes make food scraps collection and separation inefficient, e.g., culling produce with prepared foods in packaging which previously was advantageous, can add unnecessary sorting time once a department starts a food scraps recycling program.

Corrective Actions

Add prominent signage near each bin location with information (and images) of how to source-separate.

Update the color or size of bins for food scraps collection, trash, and recycling so that they are consistent and distinct from each other—work with hauler(s) for suggestions.

Translate bin signage and other training materials into additional languages (if applicable).

Create a schedule with roles and responsibilities for various tasks.

Include staff assignments in program and onboarding procedures for replacing food scrap collection bins.

Gather managers and supervisors together to discuss—and agree on—messaging.

Periodically have management meet to go over feedback, changes, best practices, and other observations for each shift, department, and area.

Identify and resolve unrelated areas of inefficiency to allow staff to feel less rushed.

Observe staff processes related to food scraps collection and separation in order to identify and modify counterproductive tasks.

Customer-Related Contamination

(Guests, diners, visitors, and any other non-staff that interact with your business)

Corrective Actions

Contamination Causes

Customers are **not interested in separating their food scraps.**

Customers are **not aware of the program or how to properly source-separate.**

Customers **cannot tell the difference between compostable and non-compostable service-ware.**

Customers feel rushed through the process of source separation.

Add magnetic screen to catch flatware that is accidentally put into the food scrap bin.

Train customer-facing staff to mention the food scraps program when interacting with customers.

Put cards, flyers, or stickers about the program in conspicuous locations.

Add prominent signage near each bin location with information (and images) of how to source-separate.

Update the color or size of bins for food scraps collection, trash, and recycling so that they are consistent and distinct from each other — work with hauler(s) for suggestions.

Staff members perform post-consumer food scraps separation instead of customers.

Add additional prompts or visual indicators, such as distinguishable bin lids, stickers, or more distinct receptacles for each waste stream.

Update service-ware so that compostable and non-compostable versions are distinct from each other, or switch to only reusable or only compostable.

Reduce sources of contamination (e.g., condiment cups, straws or take-out cups).

Add more trash and food scrap collection bins in another area to alleviate customer congestion at one location.