



## DOUBLE BENEFIT

# Composting is helping California grow healthy food and save water

It's time to get serious about saving water.

San Francisco helped 300 vineyards and orchards survive the last big drought, 2011–2017. How? Residents and businesses actively participated in the city's pioneering curbside food scrap collection program for composting, and farmers used the finished compost to keep moisture available to the roots of their crops.

Once again, we find ourselves in a major drought. By fully participating in curbside composting programs San Francisco and cities following our lead can help California farms grow more healthy food and survive the double whammy of high temperatures and drought. Curbside composting helps California save water, tremendous amounts of water.

## DIRECT BENEFIT

Applying compost softens the soil and increases tiny pockets in soil that hold water and make it available to plant roots.

Agronomist Ed Davis has focused on soil health for 50 years and advised hundreds of California farms to use compost.

"Soil is a living, breathing biomass. So, anything we can do to enhance the soil is going to improve the efficiency and availability of the water



## Improving soil health helps farms survive drought.

that is wicked through the plant's roots," Davis said. The Rodale Institute, the oldest agricultural institute in the U.S., reports farms can grow up to 40 percent more food in times of



## Compost, a natural sponge, holds moisture in the root zone.

drought if they farm naturally with compost.

Frank Olagaray grows almonds, walnuts, olives, and wine grapes in Thornton. Olagaray applies many tons of compost to his fields and says doing so helps him grow healthy crops and save water.

San Francisco started its curbside food scrap collection program for composting in 1996. Nearly 200 communities across the country followed San Francisco's lead. This success helped inspire a statewide law requiring California cities and counties to reduce the amount of compostable material they send to landfills by 75 percent by 2025. Now cities up and down the state are implementing curbside food scrap

collection programs for composting.

CalRecycle, a department of the California Environmental Protection Agency, reports that "applying all 3.2 million tons of compost currently produced annually in California increases the amount of water held in soil by about 3.7 billion gallons."

By implementing and expanding curbside composting collection programs we can significantly increase those numbers and help support water security.

"Anything we do to improve the health of the soil is going to improve the water-holding capacity," Davis said. "The better we make the ranch, the better we increase water availability and nutrient efficiency, the less water that it takes." ■



# SF recycling workers ‘keep everything going’



Proud to do their part.

Recycling supports the supply chain, and the residents, businesses, and recycling workers of San Francisco are stepping up.

The recycling truck drivers who empty the blue curbside recycling bins are seen daily doing their jobs. The sorters who staff and operate Recology recycling facilities in San Francisco are less visible but play essential roles and take great pride in the duties they perform.

Recycle Central, the 175,000-square-foot recycling plant on Pier 96, is the workhorse of San Francisco’s leading recycling program. Neighborhood route trucks deliver 500 tons of mixed recyclables to the tipping floor each day.

High-tech recycling equipment and the efforts of recycling workers combine to separate mixed recyclables into 12 different materials. Examples include cardboard, glass bottles, aluminum, steel cans, and mixed paper.

## UNSTOPPABLE

Recology is an employee-owned company. Like the drivers who collect San Francisco’s recycling, the sorters are dedicated to doing their jobs well and delivering excellent service.

The morning shift begins at 4 a.m.

Recology’s collection drivers and recycling sorters have completed all

shifts since the pandemic began and continue to strive to recycle as much as possible.

“It’s helping the community. It helps all over the world,” said material handler Noel Tucker, who has worked at Recycle Central for 15 years.

In the 10 years before the pandemic delegations from 135 countries came to San Francisco to see our recycling and curbside composting programs firsthand. Many cities inspired by San Francisco introduced 3-bin systems that include green for curbside collection of food scraps, sticks, and leaves for composting and blue for recycling.

The mills receiving recycled materials demand that finished bales have 1 percent or less impurities.

In the recycling industry, Recycle Central has a reputation for consistently producing high-quality bales of recycled materials. Tucker credits her colleagues for the positive result.

“You have to work together to succeed,” she said. “We will make it together.”

## DIFFERENT ROLES, ONE MISSION

Some workers inside Recycle Central operate large tractors that push newly delivered, mixed recyclables into large piles and load them onto conveyor systems. Others staff sorting lines.

Forklift operators stack finished bales and load shipping containers. A team of skilled mechanics keeps everything operating.

“We have to do our part. We don’t give up,” said lead equipment operator Isidro Vallejo. “Keep everything going. Make sure the pile doesn’t get too big.”

With more than 32 years of experience sorting San Francisco’s recyclables, Vallejo has seen a lot.

When he started, the recycling operation functioned in an old warehouse on Rhode Island Street on Potrero Hill. That plant produced 26 bales of cardboard a day. Now, Recycle Central produces 80 to 85 bales of recycled cardboard per day.

Like Tucker, Vallejo says San Francisco’s recycling program inspires other cities to improve their material recovery programs.

“It’s bringing everybody up little by little,” he said. ■



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