



## Trash Free Potomac Facility Program

# Recycling and Composting 2011 Case Study

# USDA HEADQUARTERS



*View of USDA Headquarters from the National Mall*

**45%**  
RECYCLED

**5%**  
COMPOSTED

### The United States Department of Agriculture

**Headquarters** at 1400 Independence Ave. SW, Washington D.C., is a model for workplace recycling. One of the largest federal office buildings, it has nearly 7,000 employees. Being an office building, its primary recycled material is paper, however their recycling efforts extend beyond simply paper. Per federal guidelines and D.C. Commercial Recycling Code, the USDA recycles plastic, metal, and glass containers, scrap metal, paper and cardboard, as well as many other office items. Through initiatives to divert compostable materials, the headquarters' cafeteria has a comprehensive collection system plus compostable trays and cafeteriaware. After collection, the materials are sent to a composting facility.

### Management of Sustainability Initiatives by Green Team

Edward Murtagh, the USDA Headquarters' Sustainable Operations Manager, is an active member of their green team and coordinator for all solid waste and recycling collection on site. Their waste minimization and recycling program is supported in large part by earnings from their recycling program. Collection workers are paid via a custodial contract but Mr. Murtagh finds his recycling program to be cost neutral as there is a modest cost to implement it. Mr. Murtagh expects the market to fluctuate but anticipates \$35,000-40,000 in revenue, a tonnage reduction of nearly 600 tons, and over \$30,000 in savings a year in tipping fees compared to their 2005 baseline.

### Tracking and Monitoring

Mr. Murtagh utilizes internal records and external tracking via the WasteWise Re-TRAC program ([www.epa.gov/wastewise](http://www.epa.gov/wastewise)). Using this online tool, he generates reports readily and shares his progress with the Trash Free Potomac Facility (TFPF) Program. As part of waste monitoring, USDA does an annual trash sort.

### Employee Outreach

Employee outreach is a focus of the USDA Headquarters. Mr. Murtagh and the USDA Green Team organize events for Earth Day and America Recycles Day each year. Composting is made noticeable in the cafeteria to encourage participation in this program. Outreach to

employees also includes a quarterly sustainability newsletter with progress feedback, informational tables, and presentations at green team meetings. This education has paid off with relatively high recycling and composting rates for the DC metro area, 45% and 5% respectively.



*Informational table at America Recycles Day event*

## Diversion of Compostable Waste

Once compostable waste is collected in bins it is processed through a food pulper and water extractor in order to reduce volume and weight.

Mr. Murtagh and many other area facilities note that the lack of a commercial composting infrastructure in the region is a barrier to robust diversion. Regardless of this fact, compostable waste diversion is important to this facility and they plan to expand their efforts in 2012.

## Increasing Access to Recycling & Waste Stream Technology

There are several waste stream technologies in place at USDA. Most notably, one can see the use of ClearStream® recycling containers to efficiently and effectively capture recyclables. This method makes visible what can be and is actually in recycling containers. By increasing visibility, they believe they are both increasing their capture rate as well as an understanding of what materials can be recycled.

In conjunction with other institutions along the National Mall, USDA Headquarters currently provides access to recycling on their property that is adjacent to the Mall, a U.S. National Park. This cooperative effort is seen as one of the obvious successes in public space recycling locally.

Within the massive office building, USDA also provides employees with access to comprehensive recycling collection stations (see picture on right).



*Food pulper and water extractor in operation*

## Managerial Support

It is important to ensure that middle and upper-level management understand and support sustainability efforts especially in large government facilities. Fortunately for federal facilities like USDA, there is an Executive Order from the President of the United States to increase recycling rates and generally institute practices that support environmental sustainability.

## Community Engagement

Along with working alongside neighboring National Mall institutions, USDA Headquarters partners with local organizations to promote environmental sustainability, like the Alice Ferguson Foundation, where they participate in the Annual Potomac Watershed Trash Summit. Mr. Murtagh is also the Co-Chair of the Trash Free Potomac Facility Program.



*Mixed Recycling/Trash/Compostable Waste Collection Stations at USDA HQs*

## Four Suggestions from Mr. Murtagh to other government facilities and businesses:

1. Obtaining baseline data is important to measuring progress and cost savings (directly and indirectly). This data also helps to garner continued support from management and provide feedback to employees.
2. Providing consistent feedback, training, and recognition to janitorial staff increases effective collection programs.
3. Networking with others and sharing experiences increases a recycling manager's awareness and motivation. Reach out to community groups as well as employees for ideas.
4. Make it fun!

## For information about USDA's waste minimization and recycling program, please contact:

Mr. Edward Murtagh  
Sustainable Operations Manager:  
[ed.murtagh@dm.usda.gov](mailto:ed.murtagh@dm.usda.gov)  
202-720-5961

## For advice on your own facility or to be part of this case study series:

Reach out to the  
Trash Free Potomac Facility Program  
Email [trash@fergusonfoundation.org](mailto:trash@fergusonfoundation.org)  
or visit [www.trashfreefacility.org](http://www.trashfreefacility.org)