

# 20 Cities Towards Zero Waste

## San Francisco



Population: 827,526

San Francisco, United States of America

### Why this city?



Since establishing the first large-scale food composting system in the US in 1996, San Francisco has pioneered circular economy leadership through innovative policies, community-centred programs, and transformative education and outreach.

## Impact & Sustainability

From 2022 to 2024 San Francisco redistributed over **15.8 million pounds** of landfill-bound food to residents for consumption, diverted **272,000 tons** of construction and demolition material from landfill, facilitated the reuse of over **12,200 pieces** of city-owned office furniture and equipment, and provided 191 businesses with free reusable food ware. Through on-going programs in each of these areas, San Francisco continues to collect data to expand its impact and make waste reduction more accessible for all residents.

## Partnership & Collaboration

San Francisco General Hospital has partnered with Copia, a for-profit food recovery technology company, to recover and redistribute surplus food to several local community organizations. These partners receive weekly donations of a variety of foods. In March 2025 alone, the hospital donated 3,781 pounds of food through Copia, helping it comply with the Mandatory Edible Food Recovery Ordinance. This partnership spans multiple sectors:

### Public

San Francisco  
General Hospital

### Private

Copia

### Community

City Team San Francisco, Arriba Juntos, San Francisco City Impact, The Salvation Army – ARC San Francisco, Guadalupe Elementary School, and others.

## Inclusiveness & Social Equity

San Francisco Marriott Marquis partners with Toolworks, a local nonprofit that provides job training and employment opportunities in housekeeping, custodial, and other roles for people with disabilities. In 2009, when the San Francisco began requiring all businesses to recycle and compost as part of its zero waste goal, the hotel sought a more efficient way to manage the 20,000 pounds of refuse generated daily on-site. Toolworks workers now manage on-site waste sorting, recycling, composting, and donation efforts, helping the hotel achieve over 85% waste diversion. This program provides meaningful employment and skills development while advancing both environmental and social equity goals in the city's green economy.

## Innovation & Technology

San Francisco has adopted a city-run Virtual Warehouse program, powered by Rheaply, to manage the reuse of surplus goods from City Departments. Surplus items in usable condition are listed on an online platform where other City Departments can claim and repurpose them. If the items are not usable by another department, they may be donated to nonprofits or schools. The Virtual Warehouse program extends the lifespan of items and keeps them out of landfill. By reusing instead of purchasing new, departments save on both procurement and disposal costs.

## Scalability & Transferability

San Francisco Composting (NRDC, 2017) examines how San Francisco's city government, in partnership with Recology and others, expanded organics diversion through a combination of legislation (mandatory composting, food service waste ordinances), financial incentives (pay-as-you-throw rate differentials), infrastructure (composting facilities), and public outreach. The report provides detailed data, lessons learned, and practical strategies that other municipalities can use to design and implement effective organics diversion programs.

## Summary

Key points	Summary
Key achievements (2022-2024)	Redistributed <b>15.8 million</b> pounds of food, diverted <b>272,000 tons</b> of construction and demolition waste, reused <b>12,200+ pieces</b> of city office equipment, and supported <b>191</b> businesses with reusable food ware initiatives.
Policies & governance	Strong regulatory framework including Mandatory Edible Food Recovery Ordinance (2022), Mandatory Recycling and Composting Ordinance (2009), Food Service and Packaging Waste Reduction Ordinance (2006), Construction and Demolition Debris Recovery Ordinance (2006), and Plastic Bag Reduction Ordinance (extended 2012).
Practices & innovations	Programs such as <b>Bring Your Own Cup (BYOC) reuse campaign</b> , food <b>recovery</b> partnerships (e.g., San Francisco General Hospital with Copia), <b>employment</b> initiatives with nonprofits like Toolworks, and the Virtual Warehouse platform to <b>reuse</b> city-owned goods.

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