Sustainable San Mateo County
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In-Depth Report Focuses on Reducing Food Emissions in San Mateo County

Food systems are one of the largest yet least addressed drivers of climate change. While emissions from energy, transportation and buildings are starting to decline, food-related emissions continue to rise. **Sustainable San Mateo County's Indicators Report** on **"Local Food Actions for a Cooler Future"** documents the challenges and actions our cities, schools, businesses and the county can take to reduce food-related emissions and ensure a sustainable and equitable future for San Mateo County. The 66-page report was unveiled October 1, 2025, at a presentation with four experts in Redwood City and can be accessed at **bit.ly/2025_Indicators_Report**.

Each year, Sustainable San Mateo County's (SSMC's) Indicators Report shares in-depth research on one critical issue in the county and includes comprehensive data, insightful maps and visualizations, case studies, profiles, and recommended solutions and policy initiatives.

After SSMC Program Manager Simona Vallone presented the report, a series of expert speakers discussed how municipalities, government agencies, the county, schools and community members can work together to overcome the biggest barriers to reducing food-related emissions. Speakers included **Michael Brownrigg**, Burlingame Vice Mayor and RethinkWaste Vice Board Chair; **Gordon Tong**, Program Manager at San Mateo County Sustainability Department; and **Kerry Dees**, Principal at Green Hills Elementary School in Millbrae.

This year's report recommends these and other key actions:

1. **County and cities:** Launch a countywide, multilingual campaign on the climate, health and equity benefits of plant-based diets.
    - Consistent, repeated messaging across jurisdictions can normalize plant-forward eating.
    - Plant-based eating has been shown to prevent, treat and even reverse chronic illnesses such as heart disease and diabetes, which disproportionately affect communities of color.
2. **Cities:** Strengthen green bin education with standardized signage, multilingual training and coordinated messaging
    - Contamination and confusion around bin sorting were found to be major barriers to compliance with SB 1383, a California law that mandates a 75% reduction in organic waste in landfills by 75% by 2025 and recovery of 20% of currently unrecovered edible food by 2025.

    - RethinkWaste has developed standardized signage and covers production costs, but adoption depends on cities opting in and ensuring materials are displayed in public spaces and other key locations.

3. **Schools:** Adopt Share Tables and participate in food recovery programs.
    - Share Tables, a statewide initiative that encourages students to place unopened, uneaten and sealed food and beverages on a communal table, remain one of the most effective, low-cost strategies for reducing food waste in schools and improving student access to nutritious food.
    - Despite the program's benefits, only a small number of schools in San Mateo County currently participate in it.

The report found:

- The largest drivers of global food emissions are **deforestation**, driven mainly by clearing land for grazing animals and growing feed crops, and **methane from livestock**. [Fig. 1.1]
- In San Mateo County in 2023, **emissions from food consumption represented 17% of total emissions**, ranking third after transportation and services (e.g., health care, entertainment), and ahead of housing and goods. [Fig. 1.6]
- Of the emissions from foods consumed at home in San Mateo County in 2023, 31% came from meats, fish and poultry and 14% came from dairy products - meaning **45% of those emissions are derived from animal products.** [Fig. 1.7]
- The best things residents can do to help lower food emissions is to **eat less meat and animal products and avoid wasting food** by buying only what you will consume - thus eliminating all the emissions generated by getting that food to your table and emissions generated by food in landfills.
- In San Mateo County, per-capita solid waste emissions have declined 30% since 2005 despite 5% population growth. Yet, **organics still represent nearly 30% of California's solid waste stream**, with food accounting for about 40% of that total.
- To avoid the methane emissions generated by food waste, we need to **educate people** about what to put in their compost bins (information that varies greatly among waste haulers), **make it easier** by adding compost bins near take-out restaurants and in high-traffic public areas, and **rally Waste Ambassadors** to help people, especially in schools and multifamily complexes, understand what goes in each bin.
- Cities can strengthen compliance by **making it easy to report violations** and following up on them.
- Most Climate Action Plans in San Mateo County give little attention to food-related emissions. **Adding measures to Climate Action Plans** to encourage plant-based diets and proper recycling of food waste will help drive support.

Founded in 1992, Sustainable San Mateo County is a nonprofit dedicated to providing the solutions, accountability and political will to provide a sustainable future for everyone in the county. For more information about SSMC, visit **sustainablesanmateo.org** or email **info@sustainablesanmateo.org**.

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