

Digesting Thanksgiving Leftovers: One Utah Facility Turning Food Waste Into Energy

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The first load of organic food waste on the receiving floor of Wasatch Resource Recovery in North Salt Lake, Utah.

WASATCH RESOURCE RECOVERY

It's nearly Thanksgiving, which means extra food — and extra food waste. But one man's garbage is another's renewable energy.

Wasatch Resource Recovery in North Salt Lake, Utah, is already taking in more than 350 tons of food waste every day, and it's only at half capacity. While it started taking some food in February 2019, Morgan Bowerman said that the last few pieces of the facility will be in place in the next few weeks and the facility will be ready to take on more waste — and produce more natural gas.

Bowerman is the sustainability and resource recovery manager at the facility, and she said Wasatch Resource Recovery's anaerobic digesters work using microbes.

"When they break down that organic waste without oxygen, they offgas methane. So we are able to capture that methane, clean it up a little bit, and stick it into the pipeline as a renewable natural gas," she said.

Without this facility, most food waste heads to the landfill. Once there, microbes will still break it down, but much slower, and all the methane gas they give off will just go into the atmosphere.

“And methane as a greenhouse gas is 20 to 100 times more potent than carbon depending on the timeline that you’re looking at,” she said.

Bowerman said most of the food waste comes from manufacturers in the area but also come from places like restaurants, grocery stores and hospitals. And there have been shipments from as far away as Nevada and Idaho. Federal agencies estimate that between 30% and 40% of food produced for human consumption is wasted.

Bowerman said that while individuals can’t bring their food to the facility yet, they’re hoping to get that program up and running soon.