

CASE STUDY

SPRING 2026

# Low-Waste Events

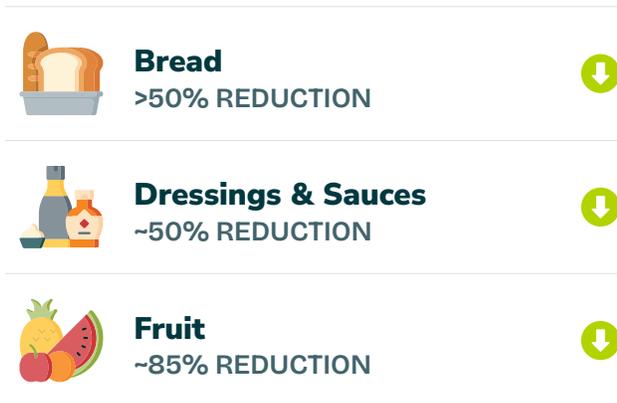
## Measuring & Reducing Food Waste in Events



# Executive Summary

Throughout 2025, ReFED and WWF ran a U.S. Food Waste Pact (Pact) pilot that examined how stronger alignment between planners and venues can prevent food waste at events. The pilot was conducted across business and professional events hosted at venues with in-house, contracted foodservice operations. The pilot tested newly developed guidelines designed to drive adoption of targeted actions that reduce food waste and advance culture change across the events industry. This shift helps turn one-time initiatives into consistent practices that strengthen team communication, build trust, and support continued improvement in sustainable event management.

**Across all pilot sites, targeted interventions reduced waste in key food categories by an average of 55%.** This illustrates how small, repeatable adjustments in a few high-waste items can generate outsized impact:



This pilot tested a full event lifecycle connecting planning, production, and post-event practices in a continuous sequence. It is the first to evaluate how coordinated actions between planners and venues can measurably reduce food waste. Across six pilot events serving more than 20,000 meals, analysis revealed that **over five tons of food went uneaten**, with the amount split nearly evenly between recovered and discarded. Extrapolated nationally across the 1.9 million business events

hosted in the U.S. each year, this equates to roughly **55,000 tons of food wasted annually, valued at more than \$330 million.**

## KEY TAKEAWAYS

### Waste hotspots are consistent across events.

**Outcome:** A small number of food categories drove a disproportionate share of uneaten food across all six sites. Soups, condiments, and entrées consistently ranked as the highest-waste items.

**Why It Matters:** Focusing on repeat high-waste categories enables meaningful waste reduction without redesigning menus or service styles.

### Without measurement, food waste remains largely invisible.

**Outcome:** Measurement revealed that a significant portion of food prepared was not consumed, making waste patterns visible and actionable for teams.

**Why It Matters:** Simple measurement builds awareness, supports behavior change, and enables more accurate production decisions.

### Operational misalignment drives overproduction.

**Outcome:** Overproduction stemmed from inaccurate guest counts, misaligned dietary information, and inconsistent production practices.

**Why It Matters:** Aligning planners and venues around shared guest data and production standards is a high-impact lever for reducing waste.

### Guidelines are adopted and sustained when they fit existing workflows.

**Outcome:** Most sites implemented multiple guidelines during pilot events and continued key practices beyond the pilot period, with planners indicating a strong likelihood of ongoing use.

**Why It Matters:** Low-barrier guidance that aligns with how teams already work is more likely to drive lasting behavior change and scale across the events industry.

# Project Overview

The pilot tested practical food waste reduction guidelines across six business events held between February and September 2025, collectively serving more than 20,000 meals. It followed a full lifecycle approach that encouraged collaboration between planners and venues to strengthen communication, align decisions, and test feasibility for implementing low-waste practices.

The guidelines provide a standardized set of actions that both planners and venues can apply to prevent food waste. While many efforts to reduce waste in hospitality focus primarily on venue operations, event planners play an equally important role in shaping food waste outcomes. The pilot demonstrated that the causes of waste, and the solutions, benefit most from shared responsibility, steady communication, and consistent alignment across roles and teams.

Through this collaborative approach between planners and venues, the pilot gathered and analyzed data on event food waste across multiple service styles (mostly buffets) and food categories. This analysis revealed systemic trends and operational barriers and demonstrated practical, scalable pathways to reduce food waste across the events industry.

To ensure that this pilot was meeting industry needs, the Pact created a working group composed of planners, venue operators, and sustainability professionals from relevant hospitality and foodservice industry groups. This group was instrumental in providing insight and feedback before, during, and after the pilot.



# Findings & Insights

Working group members and sustainability professionals noted that while zero waste ( $\geq 90$  waste-free operations) is the aspiration, a more realistic benchmark for ratio between eaten and uneaten food from buffet operations is roughly 70% eaten and 30% uneaten.

It is important to note that the uneaten food percentage excludes pre-consumer (trim) and post-consumer (plate) waste, which were outside the pilot's measurement scope. Inclusion of these additional waste streams would increase total food waste estimates beyond reported levels. Only buffet and break-service data were included in benchmark calculations due to limited measurement data.

Figure 1 shows the average percentages of eaten and uneaten food at buffets and during break service. Figure 2 illustrates the cost and rate of uneaten food across key menu categories for buffets and breaks. Bread, condiments, and desserts from plated meals were also included. It combines financial and percentage data to show which food categories contribute most to overall loss.

Figure 1: Average Percentage of Total Food Produced Eaten vs. Uneaten Across Pilot Sites

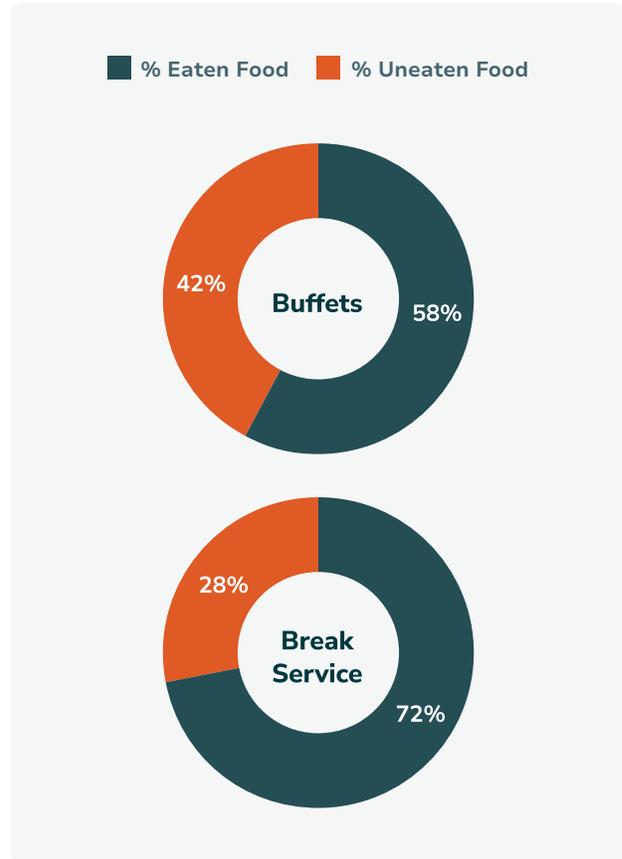
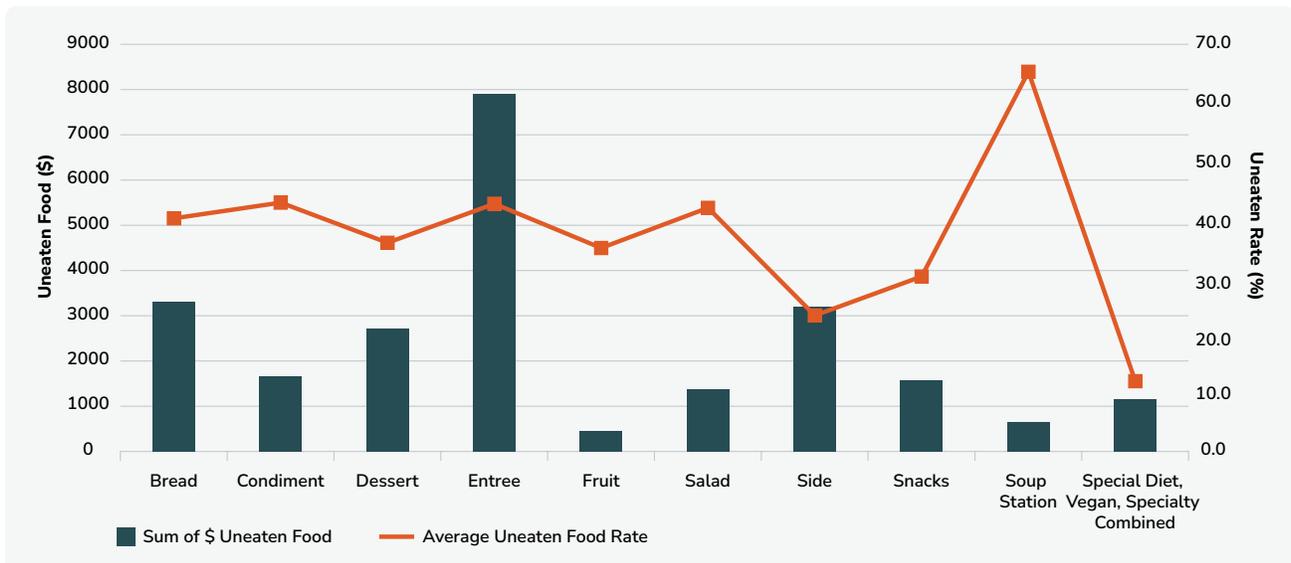


Figure 2: Uneaten Rates by Food Category



Trim, prep, and plate waste were out of scope for this pilot. Entrée values reflect buffet entrées only; plated entrées were excluded.

## FINDING 1

# Measurement and Industry Benchmarks for Events are Needed

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### Observed Challenges and Why They Occur

Despite the availability of planning tools, meal production decisions are still largely informed by intuition rather than actual data. The events industry has historically lacked standardized data on how much food guests consume, how much food is recovered, and how much food is wasted per guest. Without consistent metrics, venues and planners rely on assumptions and anecdotal experience to guide planning. This absence of data makes it difficult to forecast accurately, benchmark performance, or measure progress toward waste reduction goals.

The pilot addressed this gap by measuring the amount of food that was eaten and the amount of food that went to waste across buffets and key food categories to establish quantitative reference points.

Across pilot events, consumption rates for buffets were below the 70% efficiency target, averaging 58% of food being eaten. The remaining 42% of uneaten food was categorized further: 29% met recovery standards for donation,<sup>1</sup> and the remaining 13% went to waste destinations including compost and landfill. Planners and venues were often unaware of the magnitude of uneaten food until measurement made it visible, prompting immediate adjustments in several pilots.

While plated events occurred in the pilot, only buffet and break-service data are included in benchmark calculations due to limited measurement of plate waste.

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<sup>1</sup> The scope of this pilot only measured food that was deemed “recoverable,” meaning it met standards to be donated. The pilot team did not receive information about whether or not recoverable food was actually donated.

## Successful Examples of Implementing Food Waste Reduction and Diversion Strategies

Measurement data enabled venues to pinpoint where overproduction was occurring and test targeted actions to reduce it.

### Right-Sizing Bread Service



Audit data showed that venues were consistently overproducing bread, with waste exceeding 50% in two of the events. In two subsequent pilots, teams standardized service from 1.2 rolls to 0.8 rolls per person, achieving a reduction in bread-related costs by more than 50% while maintaining guest satisfaction.

### Reducing Dressing and Sauce Overproduction



At a 1,000-person lunch, venues halved pre-set sauces and dressings, preventing 72 pounds of food waste and saving \$1,037. Standardizing to one dressing vessel per table (instead of two) further reduced duplicate containers and eliminated roughly 50% of dressing waste.

### Fruit



Fruit waste was driven by overproduction and uneven demand across multiple offerings. By simplifying fruit service and consolidating options, guests consumed more fruit and venues achieved an estimated 85% reduction in fruit waste in one pilot, highlighting the impact of small, design-led adjustments on high-waste categories.

### Using Digital Food Waste-Tracking Tools to Establish a More Complete Picture



One pilot site used Leanpath’s integrated tablet trackers and software to measure waste, which gave additional insights when combined with the Pact’s event waste audit methodology. The data showed 677.9 pounds of uneaten food across all pathways, including trim, plate waste, donated food, and edible waste. This represented 64.3% of all food prepared. Normalized across 940 covers, the event produced 0.72 pounds of uneaten food per person.

These examples show that small, data-informed adjustments anchored in accurate guest counts and consistent production specifications can drive meaningful reductions in both waste and cost.

### Future Actions and Recommendations for Planners and Venues

- Adopt simple, low-barrier methods for tracking surplus and waste, such as photo audits during and after events to identify recurring patterns.
- Integrate digital tracking tools (e.g., Leanpath, Winnow) to capture real-time data on production, recovery, and disposal. Using these tools during event setup and teardown provides immediate feedback to inform next-day or next-event adjustments.
- Create a feedback loop between venue teams (Front of House and Back of House) and event planners. Share waste and recovery results through post-event debriefs or dashboards to identify improvement areas and highlight successes.
- Incentivize measurement participation by recognizing teams that demonstrate measurable reduction or innovative waste prevention practices.

Implementing even simple measurement systems helps create visibility, strengthen accountability, and lay the foundation for continuous improvement across both venue operations and event planning.



## FINDING 2

### Multiple Operational Factors Drive Overproduction

#### Observed Challenge and Why It Occurs

Across all pilot sites, overproduction resulted from two interconnected issues related to:

- Inconsistent or insufficient communication between planners and venues about guest counts and dietary needs
- Inconsistent production practices within venues

Together, these factors led to significant inefficiencies and surplus food across all meal types.

Analysis showed that overproduction frequently occurred when final guest counts and dietary breakdowns were not reconciled before production. At one event, 72% of special dietary meals were discarded. Contributing factors included outdated guest data, attendees not collecting the special meals they requested, and venues preparing extra portions “just in case.” This pattern appeared across multiple events, where special dietary meals including vegan, vegetarian, halal, kosher, and allergen-specific options were consistently produced in quantities far exceeding actual demand.

Uneaten rates ranged from 20% to 74% across meal types and categories. Inconsistent production practices further amplified the problem. Only one of six venues used written production specifications across all menu items. At one plated dinner, the Banquet Event Order (BEO) called for 1,200 entrées, but only 1,061 were needed, yet the kitchen produced 1,440 plates (a 20% overage). Buffet production was also influenced by portioning challenges, as portion sizes were largely determined by the size of serving dishes, and venues had a limited range of dish sizes available.

Together, these findings point to the need for clearer communication about guest data and dietary requirements, and more reliable use of production specifications to align preparation with actual eaten food rates.

## Future Actions and Recommendations for Venues

- **Clarify Guest Count:** Establish a shared process for planners to confirm and communicate final attendance and dietary data before production begins.
- **Standardize Overages:** Develop clear, data-informed overage allowances (e.g., 3–5%) to replace inconsistent internal practices.
- **Guide Preparation Through Production Specifications:** All venues had food production systems available, but only one applied them consistently. Active use ensures clarity and removes guesswork.
- **Standardize Data Entry:** Use templates or checklists, so results can be compared across events and venues to build internal benchmarks.
- **Train Cross-Functional Teams:** Incorporate food waste awareness and production specifications into pre-event briefings.
- **Embed Continuous Review:** Conduct post-event debriefs comparing forecasted and actual eaten rates to refine future planning.



## FINDING 3

### Pilot Sites Adopted Majority of Guidelines and Sustained New Practices

The guidelines developed for this pilot take a comprehensive, full-lifecycle approach to reducing food waste at events. During pilot events, observational and self-reported audits showed 61% of the developed low-waste guidelines were implemented.

Before the pilot, venues and planners had limited shared processes or accountability structures for managing food waste collaboratively. Venues and planners commonly applied food waste reduction strategies during food preparation and service, but fewer incorporated these actions in early planning stages, such as embedding waste reduction expectations in contracts, RFPs, and menu design, or in final steps like post-event reporting and data sharing. This signals opportunities for the U.S. Food Waste Pact for deeper integration in the future.

#### The Guidelines Have Staying Power

Post-pilot surveys with venue and planner participants confirmed continued practice months later, suggesting strong potential for lasting adoption and cultural change across the events industry.

Four out of five responding planners reported feeling “very likely” to continue using the practices, citing greater confidence embedding waste goals into BEOs and design discussions.

Pilot sites reported continuing the following practices:

- **Sustained Engagement:**
  - 90% of venues continued internal food-waste discussions.
  - 75% maintained right-sized serving vessels.
  - >50% made menu or setup adjustments.

- **Cross-Team Collaboration:** Culinary, banquet, stewarding, and sales teams began coordinating during pre-event meetings, using shared plans for ordering, service flow, and recovery.
- **Practical Learning:** Visual audits and on-site observation allowed staff to see waste firsthand, helping teams connect small operational adjustments to measurable reductions. This included changes to serving utensils, buffet layout, or preset items.

### Future Actions and Recommendations for Planners and Venues

- **Embed Guidelines in Pre-Event Planning:** Include food waste expectations in RFPs, contracts, and BEOs to establish clear goals early.
- **Integrate Guidelines into Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs):** Formalize prevention actions—such as portion alignment, right-sizing, and recovery—within culinary and event SOPs.
- **Strengthen Planner–Venue Communication:** Use pre-event briefings and post-event debriefs as standard practice for exchanging forecasts, observations, and improvement opportunities.
- **Support Staff Training:** Ensure new staff receive training on food waste strategies and provide refreshers as part of ongoing professional development.



# Conclusion & Next Steps

This pilot measured the first industry baselines for eaten and uneaten food. It identified where food waste commonly occurs, the causes for the waste, and successes from implementing specific food waste reduction strategies. Future opportunities lie in supporting long-term adoption of these solutions and cultural changes that embed food waste reduction practices in standard operations.



## The U.S. Food Waste Pact will focus efforts on the following long-term goals:

- 1 Embed Standards Across the Industry:** Incorporate the guidelines' prevention and measurement practices into professional development, event planning frameworks, and sustainability standards to make low-waste events an industry norm.
- 2 Strengthen Measurement and Data Alignment:** Standardize data collection across venues to establish baselines and benchmarks, track progress, and build the case for financial and environmental gains.
- 3 Accelerate Technology and Tool Integration:** Support creation and adoption of low-waste event tools and technologies that address the leading causes of waste identified in this pilot.
- 4 Validate in New Contexts:** Expand pilots across additional event types and sectors to assess effectiveness in different operational and regional environments.

# Acknowledgments

The U.S. Food Waste Pact team would like to thank Astrapto Consulting and InvestHER Strategies for their leadership and authoring of this case study. The Pact team would also like to thank the participating planners and venues for their collaboration on this effort. If you would like to know more about the methodology for this project, please request this case study's technical appendix by emailing Nia D'Emilio at [nia.demilio@refed.org](mailto:nia.demilio@refed.org).

To learn more about the U.S. Food Waste Pact, please email Kristen Lee at [kristen.lee@refed.org](mailto:kristen.lee@refed.org).

## About Astrapto Consulting

Astrapto LLC was founded in 2016 by Dr. Aurora Dawn Benton to advance positive impact in the workplace, with a focus on hospitality, travel, and events. They have trained more than 1000 professionals globally on sustainable procurement and supplier diversity, delivered workshops on food waste prevention to thousands of hospitality and event professionals, and helped more than 130 young professionals launch green teams in their place of work.



## About InvestHER Strategies

InvestHER Strategies is a sustainability consultancy specializing in food systems, food waste prevention, and operational sustainability. The firm supports organizations in designing and piloting practical, data-informed solutions that drive measurable impact while strengthening collaboration across teams. Its work focuses on aligning strategy with day-to-day operations to support scalable, long-term change. InvestHER Strategies is led by Christy Cook, a sustainability strategist and practitioner with extensive experience across foodservice, hospitality, grocery retail, large-scale events, and nonprofit and industry initiatives.



## About the U.S. Food Waste Pact

The U.S. Food Waste Pact is a national voluntary agreement that uses the "Target, Measure, Act" framework to reduce food waste across the supply chain. The Pact works with waste-generating food businesses to collect and analyze data about food waste in their operations, share best practices through precompetitive working groups, and test and scale solutions through intervention projects. The Pact is an initiative between nonprofits ReFED and the World Wildlife Fund. For more information about the U.S. Food Waste Pact, visit [usfoodwastepact.org](http://usfoodwastepact.org).



## Partner Leads



# U.S. Food Waste Pact Business Signatories

(As of Spring 2026)

