

Case study: Food organics and garden organics collection in Richmond Valley



Photo: Richmond Valley Council waste collection truck en route to Lismore Council organics facility. (Richmond Valley Council)

Richmond Valley Council, in the Northern Rivers region of north-east NSW, services a largely rural area of 3,051 square kilometres, with most industries involving cattle or crops (such as sugar cane, wheat, pecans, fruits, vegetables, timber and tea-tree).

All food scraps are good to go

Education has been critical to the successful rollout of Richmond Valley Council's food organics and garden organics collection service. With a best-practice long lead-in time and effective information provision throughout the rollout, the council brought its community on board and kept them there.

Love our valley: Recycle more

Richmond Valley Council is one of seven councils in the North East Waste (NE Waste) region, six of which now have food organics and garden organics (FOGO) collections. The region has eleven transfer stations, nine landfill sites, two recycling facilities and three organics processing facilities.

In 2013, Richmond Valley Council secured an Organics Collections Grant to reduce food waste going to landfill. Council used the grant to introduce a new FOGO service, to enable 7,500 households to put food waste into their green-lid garden waste bins.

'Some of the driving factors were potential for good diversion percentages and sound environmental outcomes with the material being composted and sold with organic certification', said Carla Dzenolet, Coordinator Waste and Resource Recovery, Richmond Valley Council.

Approach: Staged education

'Despite regional issues, such as the tyranny of distance, the councils in the North East Waste region have always been very committed to resource recovery well above the levels of metropolitan councils.'

Jeanie McKillop,
Coordinator,
North East Waste

The grant funding provided for a consulting contract educator to deliver education and communication. Education activities began nine months before the new collection service was rolled out to prepare the community for the change.

Stage 1 of the FOGO service rollout advised the community about the FOGO collection service well in advance of its introduction, explaining what the service would involve, its timing, the need for it and the benefits it would bring.

Council leveraged experiences from other councils to address head on any potential community concerns, such as worries about increased smell when the red-lid bin collection frequency changed from weekly to fortnightly. To help bring the community along, the council communicated that other councils had demonstrated that FOGO collection services are reliable, easy to use and deliver proven results.

Closer to the rollout, stickers were affixed to the lids of all existing household green-lid bins listing what could soon be placed in them. The bin lids were previously hot-stamped to say 'no food' and so the council had initially planned to replace the bin lids. Affixing the stickers was a cheaper solution and, once the collection service was operational, visually prompted households to separate waste correctly.

Stage 2 included information about the function and frequency of the new service, including guidance on how to participate, types of organics to recycle, point of contact for further information, practical advice and generated FAQs.

Every household receiving the new service was provided with:

- a kitchen caddy
- an introductory roll of compostable liners
- a brochure
- a calendar
- a fridge magnet.



Image: Instructions on how to use the council provided kitchen caddy (Richmond Valley Council)

'Due to a small, dedicated team, a well-developed communication and education plan and experience from other councils that have gone down a similar path, the project rollout went very well. The community embraced the introduction of FOGO and did a fantastic job.'

Carla Dzenolet,
Coordinator,
Waste and
Resource
Recovery,
Richmond Valley
Council

The council-supplied liners were the Compost-A-Pak® liners. Made of corn and plastic-free, the liners are Australian-certified compostable. Following the initial distribution of a free sample, a list of suppliers was posted on the council's website. Residents are discouraged from using plastic bags as bin liners.

Education and communication: What goes in which bin?

The education and communication plan included information sheets, bin stickers, print and social media, website graphics, fridge magnet calendars and event signage to educate, counter confusion and demonstrate ease of waste separation. Staff training was provided to customer service staff and truck drivers – those at the front end of queries from the community – to ensure consistency of message from every source. The capacity to create the resources in-house using the grant funding ensured communications materials and timing aligned smoothly with what was happening on the ground and could quickly adapt to changing needs.

The NE Waste regional group supported the council in its education and communication activities. The group's face-to-face community engagement program included a travelling education display that visited schools, markets and community events to engage children and answer questions. The on-site NE Waste team attended events in the Richmond Valley area to provide FOGO information, such as content lists for each bin type. At some community events, 'bin monitors' supported waste separation on-site and were on hand to answer questions about the process.

The council's message to its community was: 'All food scraps are good to go – meat, bones, fish, dairy products, coffee grindings, bread and rice – and don't forget soiled paper, such as tissues, paper towel and pizza boxes'. The 'ALL food is good to go' message was reinforced on all resources and communication platforms, including the council's website, social media, printed materials and FOGO collection trucks.

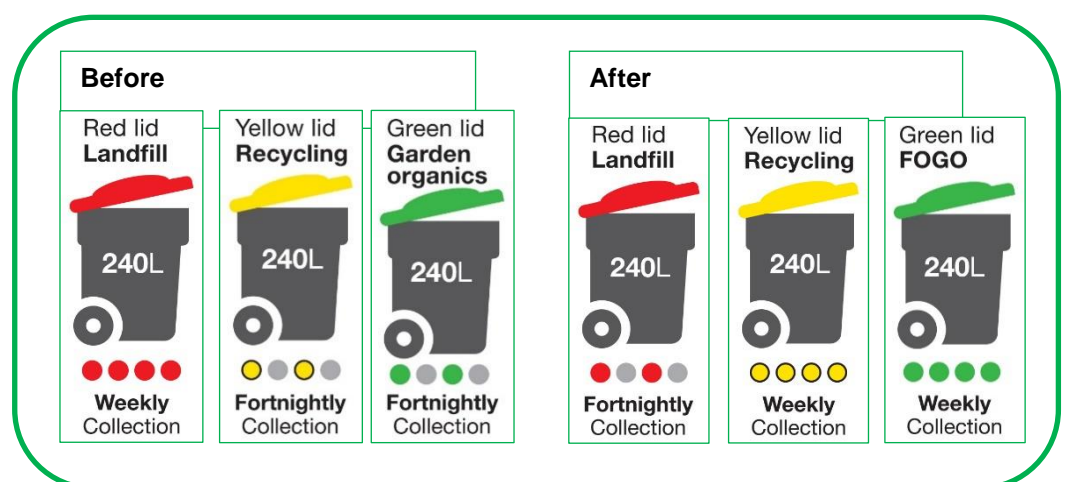


Figure: Changes to Richmond Valley Council's kerbside bin collection service.

The Environment Protection Authority's Organics Collections Grants provide up to \$1.3 million to councils and business to introduce new food only or food and garden collection services. They are administered by the Environmental Trust and open for applications over several funding rounds.

Room for improvement

Before the service began, 1,971 tonnes of garden organics were collected in the local government area over one year. Following its introduction, in 2016–17, a total of 3,085 tonnes of food and garden were collected; this was 500 tonnes more than expected and an increase of about 2.94 kilograms per household per week.

While the recovery rate is better than expected, there is room for improvement; and the council is working on achieving further gains. An audit of individual red-lid bins five months after implementation showed FOGO in these bins had decreased by 51% in weight. However, of the total volume of red-lid bin content, 5% is food, 1% is garden material and 2% is contaminated paper that could be composted if placed in the FOGO bin.

Results: Closing the loop

The collected FOGO waste is taken to Lismore to be processed at Lismore City Council's Organics Waste Processing Facility. The material is screened, shredded, pasteurised and commercially processed into a high quality organically certified compost product. The Lismore plant is one of the few facilities in NSW that are certified organic. This means the end product can fetch a good price and is suitable for multiple markets, including the region's organic farmers, producers and householders. The high demand for the compost is demonstrated by a move from selling compost by the truckload rather than in individual bags, which also reduces plastic bag use.

Looking forward

Six months after the service rollout, Richmond Valley Council continues to engage the community, running a campaign to commend households for their participation in the service. The council now employs a dedicated Education Officer to keep up the communications for this and other council waste activities, including social media campaigns.

Social media has become the key platform for community engagement as it has proven to be the most effective way of talking about, and responding to, both negative and positive responses to the new service. Ongoing distribution of fridge magnet calendars and travelling displays will reinforce the perpetual nature of the program, with a goal of 100% separation and 0% contamination becoming second nature to the Richmond Valley community.

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