

# A Green Guide for Waste Management and Recycling During Special Events at National Capital Region Parks

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The National Park Service (NPS) oversees a network of nearly 400 natural, cultural, and recreational sites across the United States. The treasures and properties in this network have been set aside by the American people to preserve, protect, and share the legacies of this land.

People from around the world visit national parks to experience America's story, marvel at the natural wonders, and have fun. These visitors bring with them or generate onsite millions of tons of waste, much of which is recyclable or compostable.

In addition, many special events including festivals, demonstrations, and picnics attract large crowds, often overwhelming the park's existing waste management and recycling capacity. You can help by planning ahead to manage waste and recycle at your event.

NPS and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) developed this guide to help private event organizers and park managers successfully plan waste reduction and recycling programs for special events held at national parks. The guide walks you through each step, beginning with pre-event planning, moving on to day-of-event tips, and concluding with post-event evaluation. Following these guidelines, you can make your next event more environmentally friendly, ultimately helping preserve the beauty and sustainability of the nation's park system.

## Pre-Event Activities

Beverage containers, snacks, souvenirs, and pamphlets at special events can turn into heaps of trash. What is the best way to help the National Park Service keep your event clean and litter free? Use this planning guide to develop a waste management and recycling plan before your event.

Start by determining what wastes will be generated during your event and which materials—such as glass, aluminum, plastic, cardboard, and paper—can be collected for recycling in the national park and in the surrounding community. Consider what can be composted as well, such as food scraps and food-soiled paper. Coordinate with park staff to learn which materials already are being recycled and whether existing infrastructure, such as recycling bins and dumpsters, can handle additional materials generated during your event.



Photo courtesy of U.S. EPA

Placing recycling bins beside trash receptacles makes it easy for attendees to recycle during special events.

## 10 Quick Steps for Recycling at Special Events

1. Determine what wastes will be generated at your event.
2. Coordinate with park staff.
3. Contract with a hauler.
4. Involve vendors and exhibitors.
5. Select recycling bins.
6. Recruit and train volunteers.
7. Place recycling bins beside trash cans in high-traffic areas.
8. Create signs for recycling stations, and label bins with text and graphics.
9. Monitor and empty bins regularly.
10. Donate leftover food and supplies.

## Think about waste prevention first.

Evaluate opportunities to prevent waste in the first place. Waste prevention means considering actions that will generate the least amount of waste. Eliminating a waste means you don't have to collect or recycle it. For example, serving food buffet style rather than using boxed lunches or skipping the "box" in boxed lunches translates to less waste. Waste prevention can yield financial savings in addition to environmental benefits.

## Create a recycling plan for your event.

- Involve relevant stakeholders, including national park staff, event organizers, partner organizations, concessioners, haulers, and volunteers.
- Create simple maps showing the location of recycling, composting, and garbage bins, as well as where signage will be placed.
- List staff and volunteer tasks and map out their shifts and responsibilities.

## Sign a contract with a recycling hauler.

When choosing a hauler, consider the factors below.

- Cost of services. Ask if the hauler might donate its services for your event.
- Hauler's experience with recycling at special events.
- Range of materials accepted.
- Availability of containers. (Some might be available through cities or counties.)
- Hauler's ability to measure and report recycling data.

For assistance, talk to your local government representative responsible for waste management and recycling.

## Coordinate with vendors and exhibitors.

Concessioners, vendors, and exhibitors play a key role in the success of recycling efforts. Involve them early in the planning process by asking for their input and incorporating their ideas. Determine what types of waste they expect to generate, let them know what materials you plan to collect, and ask for their cooperation. If possible, include clauses in contracts that require their participation in the recycling program, such as requiring concessioners to sell beverages only in recyclable bottles and cans, rather than disposable cups. If they prefer to use cups, encourage use of plastic cups, if markets exist for recycling them.

Although it can be difficult to find recyclers for plastic cups, those made with #1 (PET) or #2 (HDPE) resins seem to be more accepted than other resins.

A few months before the event, send introductory letters to your vendors describing your recycling program's goals, policies, and procedures and outlining their responsibilities. (See Appendix A: Sample Vendor Letter.) During the event, provide concessioners with recycling bins and lids, liners, and signs to make it easy for them to participate.



Photo courtesy of U.S. EPA

Displaying banners like this one helps remind vendors and attendees to look for and use recycling bins during your event.

## Select recycling bins.

The type of event, anticipated weather conditions, likelihood of reusing the bins at future events, costs, and many other factors affect decisions about what types of bins to use. Options include renting, purchasing (particularly for an annual event), or using disposable bins. In addition, recycling haulers sometimes supply bins as part of their contracts for service, and some municipalities loan or lease bins for events.

- Choose recycling bins that are visually different from receptacles for trash.
- Take the weather into account if the event is outside. Cardboard bins, for example, are not durable enough for heavy winds or rain.
- Consider using bins with clear bags. They serve as an instant advertisement about what materials can be recycled and make it easy to see when the bins need to be emptied.

## Recruit and train staff and volunteers.

Although volunteers are not needed at every special event, their support can help ensure the success of recycling programs. Once you have estimated how much waste and recycling the event is likely to generate and how many bins will be required, determine how many volunteers will be needed. Solicit volunteers 2 to 4 months before the event through local newspapers, message boards, and other organizations, such as universities, high schools, and local service groups like the Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, and 4-H. Plan on having one volunteer per recycling station (depending on the size and duration of the event), at least two volunteers to troubleshoot during the event, and one recycling coordinator. Volunteers can help reduce contamination (mixing of trash with recyclables) by pointing out proper bins to attendees.

## Create recycling signs.

Clear and noticeable signs indicating where the public can recycle are essential to ensuring a successful program. Create signs that use both graphics and words to communicate what materials are recyclable. Graphics can be especially useful to increase compliance by non-English speakers.



Photo courtesy of U.S. EPA

This cardboard recycling bin is clearly labeled using both words and graphics.



Photo courtesy of U.S. EPA

Signs like this one educate attendees about which materials are recyclable at your event.

## Consider composting food scraps.

Organic materials are among the highest volumes of materials collected at events. Composting food scraps, coffee grounds, and paper contaminated with food residue is a great way to prevent waste and increase your recycling rate. If the national park or nearby community does not have a composting program, work with the waste or recycling hauler to identify alternatives. Consider delivering organic materials to local farmers, community gardens, or institutions with existing composting programs.

## Donate leftover food.

Some nonprofit organizations, including food rescue agencies, accept donations of fresh and prepared foods. Consider partnering with one or more of these organizations to collect and redistribute leftover food and beverage items.

## During Event Activities

Arrive early the day of the event, allowing ample time to set up the recycling bins and signage, establish a staging area for collecting recyclables throughout the event, and organize staff and volunteers. Work with concessioners, exhibitors, vendors, event staff, and volunteers during the event to reduce unnecessary waste and recycle as much as possible.

## Place recycling and composting bins.

Strategic placement of signs and receptacles can help maximize collection and reduce contamination (mixing of trash with recyclables).

- Distribute recycling and composting bins throughout the event grounds in high-traffic areas and where high volumes of waste will be generated, such as near concession areas, restrooms, and entrances and exits.
- Place a recycling bin next to each trash can. Pairing the two can help reduce contamination and encourage more people to recycle.

## Install signage.

- Place banners above bins to help attendees locate the recycling areas from a distance.
- Put a sign or label on each side of the recycling bin.

## Tips for Reducing Food-Related Waste

- Buy in bulk rather than individual servings, e.g., ketchup and mustard.
- Use refillable or reusable containers.
- Buy supplies with recycled content, such as paper cups and napkins.
- Use recyclable containers or compostable ones if composting is available.



Using clear plastic bags in recycling receptacles helps attendees easily recognize which materials are recyclable.

## Set up recycling staging area.

The staging area can serve as a place for recycling volunteers to check in, sort materials if needed, and observe the material flow. The hauler should be able to access the staging area to pick up the recyclables.

## Greet vendors and exhibitors.

Provide clear instructions on how to recycle and whom to contact for questions. Collect cardboard that vendors and exhibitors may have at the staging area, away from the public recycling stations.

## Organize staff and volunteers.

Hold a brief day-of-event meeting and walk-through of the site to point out the location of recycling stations and the staging area.

## Monitor and empty bins.

Monitor the recycling bins throughout the day. Empty them regularly to avoid overflow and so waste doesn't end up in recycling bins. Transport the recyclables from the bins to the staging area.

## Break down and clean up.

Remember that materials continue to be generated during cleanup. Assist vendors with taking down their booths and stations. Oversee final sorting, collection, and transport of materials.

- Ensure that the hauler picks up the recyclables.
- Ensure that donated food is picked up or dropped off as planned.

## Post-Event Activities

Congratulations! Now that your event is over and the last attendees have headed home, the final step is to assess the success of your waste prevention and recycling program. Following the steps below, you can audit your event's total environmental performance and impact. Use the results to assess your success and to make improvements to your program in the future.

### Collect data.

- Follow up with your hauler/recycler for final weights on the amounts of recyclables, compost, and garbage collected.
- Ask for feedback and suggestions from stakeholders involved in the event, including national park staff, event organizers, volunteers, vendors, exhibitors, and haulers.

### Share your success.

- Generate a brief summary highlighting the results from your waste prevention and recycling efforts and listing any lessons learned that might improve your program next time.
- Thank your event organizers, vendors, hauler, and volunteers with a post-event email or note, highlighting the recycling rates and waste prevention results.

# Appendix A

## Sample Vendor Letter

The [name of event] is counting on you to help make this year's [event] another huge success. Events at [event site] generate a large amount of waste, and the organizing committee is committed to minimizing the amount going into landfills. We ask that you support our efforts to be an environmentally sensitive event by recycling the material you generate at your booth. Please complete the Onsite Needs and Plan Form below.

Return the form to [event coordinator] by [date]. [List any specific waste management procedures, such as materials to be recycled, vendor responsibilities, etc.]

### Onsite Needs and Plan Form

Please return to [event coordinator] by [date].

Vendor Company: \_\_\_\_\_

Contact Person: \_\_\_\_\_

Contact Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Fax: \_\_\_\_\_ Email: \_\_\_\_\_

### Please describe any items you plan to distribute at your booth:

Will your booth operations or items you give away generate any packaging/garbage (plastic wrappers, foil bottle caps, etc.)? Please describe so that we can be prepared:

Please describe any needs you have on the day of the event (power, tables, chairs, etc.):

What else do you plan to do/have at your booth? Describe anything else you plan to bring:

[Name(s)] at [phone numbers] will be your contacts for booth setup and onsite logistical needs.

THANK YOU FOR YOUR HELP in making the [event] a great event. See you on [date].

## Resources

- “A Comprehensive Guide to Venue and Event Recycling: Single-Serve Recycling Toolkit,” NAPCOR  
[www.napcor.com](http://www.napcor.com)
- “Best Management Practices Guidebook for Special Event-Generated Waste,” Northeast Recycling Council  
[www.nerc.org/special\\_events\\_recycling\\_and\\_composting.html](http://www.nerc.org/special_events_recycling_and_composting.html)
- Earth 911  
[www.earth911.com](http://www.earth911.com)
- Feeding America  
<http://feedingamerica.org>
- Go Recycle, Washington, DC, area local government resources  
[www.GoRecycle.org](http://www.GoRecycle.org)
- Maryland Recycling Network  
[www.marylandrecyclingnetwork.org](http://www.marylandrecyclingnetwork.org)
- Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments  
[www.mwcog.org/environment/recycling](http://www.mwcog.org/environment/recycling)
- “Recycling at Events: A Guide to Reducing Waste at Any Event,” Recycling Advocates/City of Portland, Oregon  
[www.recyclingadvocates.org/pdf/pubs/events.pdf](http://www.recyclingadvocates.org/pdf/pubs/events.pdf)
- U.S. EPA  
[www.epa.gov/recycle](http://www.epa.gov/recycle)
- Virginia Recycling Association  
[www.vrarecycles.org](http://www.vrarecycles.org)



Solid Waste and Emergency Response (5306P)  
EPA 530-F-10-011  
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[www.epa.gov/recycle](http://www.epa.gov/recycle)