

Viewpoint: Pass food waste bill

By Todd Kaminsky Published 10:53 pm EDT, Thursday, March 28, 2019



Todd Kaminsky, D-Rockville Centre, in the Senate Chamber at the state Capitol on Tuesday, Jan. 29, 2019, in Albany, N.Y. (AP Photo/Hans Pennink)

Each year, New Yorkers produce more than 3.9 million tons of food scraps from restaurants, grocery stores and other facilities. The vast majority of these food scraps are dumped into our landfills, where they break down and release methane — a greenhouse gas with 86 times the global warming potential of carbon dioxide.

But it doesn't all have to go to waste. Edible food can be donated to those in need, while inedible food can be used to produce a fuel that can significantly reduce carbon emissions in New York, in line with the United Nations' goal to eliminate 50 percent of food waste by 2030.

I've introduced legislation in the state Senate that will require supermarkets, restaurants and other large generators of excess food to donate their leftovers and send inedible food to a processing facility to be turned into fuel, made from the methane gases the decomposing wastes emit. By capturing these gases, instead of allowing them to escape into the atmosphere, and by using the fuel to generate power, heat homes or fuel vehicles, we can move New York toward our state's aggressive carbon reduction goals.

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The environmental argument to divert inedible food waste from landfills is strong – but so is the economic one. Just last week, the Long Island Power Authority unanimously agreed to contract with American Organic Energy (AOE) to use the fuel for power generation that will be created at its Yaphank facility from commercial food scraps. This deal will create 100 new jobs and millions in economic activity.

AOE will process 180,000 tons of food waste per year, reducing carbon dioxide emissions by 85,000 tons per year. That is equal to taking 18,000 cars off the road. The location of AOE's new facility will also drastically reduce traffic to landfills by 1.4 million miles per year.

Building more facilities like AOE's in New York is a no-brainer. Ten food "digesters" processing just half of New York's food waste would eliminate nearly one million tons of CO2 per year – the equivalent of 180,000 cars – and create 1,000 new green jobs for New Yorkers.

Right now, the Legislature and Gov. Andrew Cuomo are working on the state's annual budget, which is due April 1. As part of that agreement, they should also approve the food waste bill.

The longer we wait to tackle our food waste problem, the more harm we do to our state and New Yorkers. We just can't keep biting off more than we can chew.

Todd Kaminsky is a state senator representing Long Island.