ADVANCING RECYCLING FROM AIRCRAFT CABINS

Strategies for Flight Kitchens

Commercial airlines in the United States deplane more than 200,000 tons of waste every year, largely from the provisioning of in-flight food and beverages. Approximately 25 to 35 percent of this waste by weight consists of valuable recyclables such as aluminum cans, plastic bottles, and paper. Flight kitchens—defined broadly to include all flight catering operations, including in-house airline provisioners, that supply flights with food, beverages, snacks, and associated service items—are a major collector of this deplaned waste after it reaches the destination airport.

THE BUSINESS CASE—WHY RECYCLE?

Flight kitchens play an important role in the recycling system as they both provide the food, beverages, and service items for the airlines and receive deplaned waste through galley carts. According to industry estimates, the annual cost of disposing of aircraft waste is estimated at $20 to $26 million. Meanwhile, the market value of common recyclable materials generated from U.S. passenger flights is estimated at $18 to $26 million annually. While some flight kitchens already recycle materials like aluminum, plastic bottles, or paper, significant opportunities still exist to reduce waste, increase recycling, and reduce provisioning costs. Effective recycling can help flight kitchens save money and provide better service. Recycling can also help meet state or local recycling requirements and build a positive green image.

BUILDING ON EXISTING SYSTEMS

Currently, deplaned waste and recyclables are typically directed to one of the following:

- An airport-managed system, in which cabin service crews or terminal maintenance personnel take materials to waste or recycling containers owned or operated by the airport or its contractor.

- An airline-managed system, in which either:
  - Flight kitchen crews take materials to flight kitchens or in-house airline provisioning operations for handling, or
  - Cabin service crews place materials in containers owned or operated by the airline or its contractor.

At airports where recycling infrastructure is not available or easily accessible to airlines, including some smaller airports, airlines may back-haul or transport recyclables to another location with the appropriate recycling services. The recycling best practices summarized here fully utilize and expand on the existing airport- and airline-managed systems for handling waste and recyclables. The parent document to this summary sheet, ACRP Report 100: Recycling Best Practices—A Guidebook for Advancing Recycling from Aircraft Cabins, provides more information.

Alaska Airlines handles its catering and recycling through six flight kitchen locations. Flights are often double-catered at the origin airport, meaning that food service is provided for both the outbound and return trips. Recyclable materials from both flights are typically returned to the original catering location for recycling, while bagged garbage is often unloaded at each airport.
STRATEGIES FOR GETTING STARTED

Flight kitchens can partner with airlines and in-house airline provisioning can work with in-flight and facilities departments to implement the following recycling best practices.

Secure top-down and bottom-up commitment within the flight kitchen and its airline customers for recycling efforts. Successful recycling programs combine executive leadership and Green Teams with active support of frontline employees, including crews that collect and handle materials from the aircraft galley. Flight kitchens can work with airlines to identify and support opportunities for recycling and minimizing waste.

Develop consistent procedures to handle recyclables from galley carts. Consistent in-flight separation and storage of recyclables in galley carts facilitates recycling at the flight kitchen. Providing convenient, clearly marked recycling containers next to each waste container in the flight kitchen increases recycling and reduces contamination.

Track, evaluate, and share data on program performance. Working with airline customers to conduct periodic waste assessments and to track recycling rates, cost savings, and per-passenger waste quantities can increase recycling efficiency and uncover opportunities for improvement.

Make recycling part of everyday business by providing education, training, and support on recycling handling and storage to kitchen and airline personnel—and celebrate success. In the kitchen, on the truck, and in the galley, providing specific information and visual cues on recycling collection, storage, and handling supports effective recycling.

OPTIONS FOR TAKING YOUR PROGRAM TO THE NEXT LEVEL

- Make or recommend purchasing choices that facilitate recycling and reduce waste.
- Work with airlines to develop contracts that deliver cost savings for increased recycling and reduced waste. Making the costs of waste and recycling visible and sharing the benefits of recycling with airline customers can foster greater participation.
- Consider collecting food scraps and other organics for composting, where possible.
- Foster collaboration and support industry-wide recycling by sharing best practices and lessons learned across locations within your company and with other airline customers.

RESOURCES

- Alaska Airlines Food Service Policies & Procedures in Appendix C of ACRP Report 100