

# CIRCULAR TABLE

The Samaritan Project, a nonprofit execution lab focused on building practical circular systems, conducted an initial Circular Table pilot in Los Angeles to test how underutilized food could be recovered and actively used at the local level. The pilot focused on converting recovered food into prepared meals and other usable outputs, while tracking operational, environmental, and economic signals.



## Overview

### Background

Across local food systems, key gaps persist:

- A significant portion of surplus food is never captured into recovery systems, remaining outside formal redistribution pathways
- Food recovery often stops at collection or donation, with limited visibility into actual use
- A significant portion of “recovered” food is still underutilized or wasted
- Usable food is often diverted to lower-risk disposal pathways (including composting) due to liability concerns, safety uncertainty, and limited redistribution infrastructure
- Businesses lack simple systems to redirect surplus into meaningful outputs
- There is minimal data on how food can be efficiently utilized at the neighborhood level

Food recovery systems often lack:

- **feedback loops between recovery organizations and the communities they serve**, limiting visibility into actual use
- **end-to-end tracking across the recovery pipeline**, making it difficult to measure impact or inefficiencies
- **consistent accommodation of dietary and religious needs**, reducing accessibility of recovered food
- **localized, resilience-oriented coordination**, where food can be prepared and stored in advance to reduce strain on partners during operational or climate-related stress

As a result, a significant portion of recovered food remains underutilized, limiting both environmental and community impact.

Food waste remains a major environmental issue, contributing significantly to methane emissions and reinforcing the need for more resilient, localized utilization systems.

With SB 1383 mandating organic waste diversion across California, this pilot was designed to test how recovered food can move beyond diversion into consistent, local utilization.

### What We Did

Circular Table was made possible through a paid, mixed-background workforce, including individuals with traditional food and operations experience and those re-entering the workforce, compensated at approximately \$23–\$30/hour.

With initial seed funding, all meals produced during the pilot were distributed at no cost to individuals and families affected by the Eaton Fire.

**During the pilot, we:**

- Recovered surplus *produce* from local sources on a weekly cadence
- Converted materials into prepared meals within 24 hours
- Transformed byproducts (e.g., juice pulp) into additional food outputs
- Coordinated distribution directly within the community, incorporating dietary and religious considerations
- Tracked material flow, outputs, and usage in real time

<b>Pilot Constraints</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Demand exceeded supply through word-of-mouth, indicating strong community need</li> <li>• Limited delivery capacity constrained reach and consistency of distribution</li> <li>• Last-minute shifts in partner availability highlighted the need for more stable coordination infrastructure</li> </ul>
<b>Results</b>	<p>Early pilot signals showed:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <b>~90% utilization</b> of recovered food <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ significantly reducing loss between recovery and actual use</li> </ul> </li> <li>• <b>30-50 oz</b> of prepared food produced per person <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Estimated cost efficiency of <b>~\$7-\$11 per person</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>→ demonstrating potential for low-cost, high-efficiency utilization</li> </ul> </li> </ul> </li> <li>• <b>120-200 individuals served weekly</b> through prepared meals and outputs</li> </ul> <p>These results demonstrate a high-efficiency, low-cost model for localized food utilization, with clear opportunities to expand reach through improved logistics and coordination.</p>

## Insights

As a reminder, The Samaritan Project operates at the intersection of circular economy, community innovation, and economic development. This pilot was approached through a climate and waste lens—focused on understanding how every stage of surplus food can be captured, utilized, and redirected.

The following insights were observed:

### 1. Utilization is a critical—but incomplete—system layer

While utilization is essential, it is not the only gap. The pilot highlighted that both **food capture and post-recovery utilization** remain inconsistent, pointing to a broader system that is still highly fragmented.

### 2. Decentralized coordination improves system performance

The pilot demonstrated that decentralized, neighborhood-level coordination allows for:

- faster response and turnaround
- more adaptive distribution
- reduced strain on individual partners

It also reduces reliance on single-point storage or redistribution, enabling more flexible routing across a distributed network of businesses and community partners.

### 3. Prepared meals and light processing increase effectiveness

Converting recovered food into prepared meals:

- reduces misuse of raw ingredients
- improves accessibility across dietary and cultural needs
- increases likelihood of full utilization

Additionally, *simple extensions such as freezing* allow for buffering supply without requiring preservatives, maintaining scratch kitchen quality while improving resilience.

### 4. Logistics is both a constraint and a system opportunity

The pilot highlighted that:

- delivery limitations directly impact reach and consistency
- current transport methods are often inefficient (packaging, temperature control, timing)

Improving logistics, particularly through distributed delivery networks, represents a key opportunity for scale.

## **5. Simple, localized models can operate with high efficiency**

Despite minimal infrastructure, the pilot achieved:

- high utilization rates
- relatively low cost per output
- consistent weekly execution

This suggests that complex, centralized systems are not required to achieve strong outcomes.

## **6. Workforce integration is operationally viable**

A mixed-background, paid workforce including individuals re-entering the workforce was able to effectively execute recovery, preparation, and distribution.

This demonstrates the viability of inclusive workforce models within circular systems.

## **7. Climate and system efficiency are closely linked**

Decentralized and localized operations can:

- reduce transportation distances and associated emissions
- improve time sensitivity of food handling
- increase overall system efficiency

The pilot also surfaced gaps in how food is handled across the pipeline, including opportunities for improved storage, packaging, and monitoring tools.

## **8. Data and infrastructure gaps extend beyond food use**

The pilot revealed a lack of:

- consistent, shared data across regions
- clear pathways for non-edible waste (e.g., energy, compost, biochar)
- tools to assess safety and quality in real time

This highlights the need for broader system integration beyond individual food recovery efforts alone

## **9. Education and handling practices impact outcomes**

There is a need for greater clarity around:

- food quality (e.g., bruising vs spoilage)
- safe handling and storage practices
- when and how food should be routed

These factors directly affect how much food can be successfully utilized.

## **10. The model can expand beyond produce**

Produce was used as a controlled entry point for the pilot. However, the model has the potential to expand to:

- prepared foods
- packaged goods
- proteins and other perishable items
- byproducts from additional industries

# **In Conclusion**

The pilot highlights a clear opportunity to move beyond fragmented food recovery toward integrated, localized systems that improve both food capture and utilization, while increasing resilience, efficiency, environmental impact, and

economic viability at the community level.

For additional information or to explore pilot alignment, please contact Val Wimes at [val@goodsameritan.org](mailto:val@goodsameritan.org).