

# RFI Submission — ReThink Disposable at Clean Water Action

---

## 1. General Information

**Organization/Respondent Name\*:** Clean Water Fund

**Street Address:** 1315 Walnut St Suite 1650

**City, State, Zip:** Philadelphia, PA, 19107

**Primary Business:** Environmental Nonprofit

**Point of Contact Name\*:** Mercedes Forsyth

**Title:** Environmental Health Organizer

**Phone\*:** (231) 729-1552

**Email\*:** mforsyth@cleanwater.org

**Organization Web Address:** [cleanwater.org/pa](http://cleanwater.org/pa)

## 2. Proposal Introduction

**Mission Statement:** Clean Water Action works in Pennsylvania to protect our water and health, from watershed to water tap.

**Description:** Clean Water Fund is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit with about 100 full time and part time employees that has been operating since 1974. In Pennsylvania, our programs focus on clean water, zero waste, environmental justice, and public health. We use education, technical assistance, and direct community engagement to drive solutions that are locally informed and sustainable.

### **Core Programs and Focus Areas**

- **Zero Waste:** Through our *ReThink Disposable* program, we work with food service businesses, schools, and emergency food providers to replace single-use disposable items with cost-effective reusable systems.
- **Lead Hazard Awareness:** We conduct public education on lead hazards and how to safely identify and address them in the home through our *Lead Hazard Awareness Program*.

- **Environmental Justice & Pollution Prevention:** In Philadelphia, we work directly in EJ communities to monitor air quality, end illegal dumping, implement greening strategies, and advance stormwater solutions.

## **Local Relevance**

Clean Water Fund has worked in Philadelphia for decades, partnering with residents, community organizations, small businesses, and local institutions to improve water quality, reduce pollution, and protect public health. Our organization played a key role in the successful implementation of Philadelphia's plastic bag policy, which reduces litter and pollution by promoting the reuse of carryout bags.

We also lead *ReThink Disposable*, a nationally recognized waste reduction program that helps food service businesses eliminate single-use disposable items at the source. In Philadelphia, we have piloted and scaled this initiative in partnership with community-serving institutions and small businesses—particularly in Environmental Justice communities. Our team provides technical support and tailored recommendations that reduce both waste and long-term costs for businesses.

Through our *Resilient Communities Stormwater Initiative (RCSI)*, we work directly with neighborhoods vulnerable to flooding and stormwater runoff. This program helps residents understand how climate change impacts their communities and empowers them with practical solutions such as green infrastructure, rain gardens, and urban farming. RCSI also provides community-based education to reduce stormwater pollution and build local resilience.

Together, these programs reflect our long-standing commitment to environmental education, sustainability, and equity across Philadelphia.

## **3. Proposal Body**

Clean Water Action would like to propose our program ReThink Disposable as a core waste reduction strategy for the City of Philadelphia's ongoing efforts to divert waste and improve environmental health. By focusing on behavior change and reusable alternatives, this program stops waste at its origin rather than managing it after disposal.

ReThink Disposable is a proven upstream waste diversion method designed to **reduce trash before it starts** by eliminating single-use disposable foodware at the source. Originally launched in California in 2011, ReThink Disposable expanded to Philadelphia in 2023. Since then, our pilot has demonstrated significant success.

In Philadelphia, we have worked directly with 20 local food service businesses, helping them eliminate over 2 million single-use disposable items annually. Participants have saved between \$2,000 and \$23,000 per year while significantly reducing waste generation. These measurable

impacts illustrate that ReThink Disposable is a cost-effective, scalable solution that transforms business practices toward sustainability.

### **How ReThink Disposable Works**

ReThink Disposable partners directly with food service businesses and institutions to eliminate single-use disposable items and switch to durable, reusable alternatives. The program provides comprehensive support to ensure successful implementation and lasting impact.

First, we conduct an assessment of the business's current disposable use to identify opportunities for reduction. Then, we provide reusable products tailored to the business's needs, such as reusable cups, containers, utensils, and bags. These products are carefully sourced and delivered by our team to reduce barriers for the business.

Alongside product provision, we offer hands-on technical assistance, helping businesses redesign their operations to integrate reusable systems efficiently. This includes training staff on new procedures, educating them on the environmental and cost benefits, and troubleshooting challenges during the transition.

### **Additional Information on Implementation**

Our work leverages strong partnerships with influential local organizations including the Sustainable Business Network of Greater Philadelphia, Circular Philadelphia, Green Philly, and Echo Systems. These collaborations enable us to reach a wide network of food businesses and institutions, amplifying program adoption and success citywide.

Additionally, thanks to the substantial community connections built through our Resilient Communities Stormwater Initiative (RCSI), especially in West and Southwest Philadelphia, we have trusted relationships with residents and community leaders. We will utilize these connections to engage more local businesses and amplify the program's reach in neighborhoods most impacted by waste and pollution.

Ideally, we would also leverage our established relationship with the Philadelphia School District and build on our success providing reusable foodware solutions to schools in New England. By bringing these proven strategies to Philadelphia public schools, we aim to reduce single-use waste and increase the use of durable reusables in school cafeterias—helping foster sustainable habits in youth while decreasing waste volume in the city.

The only support required from the City is funding, and that is why we believe there should be waste reduction funding included in future RFPs. With this investment, Clean Water Fund can reduce over 2 million pieces of single-use disposable waste annually for every year funded. For example, a two-year funding commitment would result in at least 4 million pieces diverted from Philadelphia's waste stream.

Furthermore, we will collaborate with the City to produce co-branded case studies and reports that document program outcomes and share data-driven insights. These materials will support

transparency, public engagement, and informed decision-making around waste reduction policies.

Clean Water Fund and ReThink Disposable are ready to partner with the City of Philadelphia to create a cleaner, healthier, and more sustainable city by preventing waste before it begins.

- **Organization Overview**

- Clean Water Action's mission and presence in Philadelphia
- Summary of the ReThink Disposable program
- Years of operation, full-time staff, and relevant partnerships

- **Experience in Philadelphia**

- Pilot success in Philadelphia
- Work with emergency food relief institutions, schools, and small businesses
- Focus on environmental justice communities

- **Collaborative Approach**

- National team support (e.g., CA and NJ ReThink teams)
- Technical assistance and policy engagement capabilities

---

## II. Methodologies to Evaluate Health and Environmental Impacts

- **Measurement Tools**

- Waste audits conducted before and after intervention
- Metrics tracked: plastic reduction (lbs/year), waste diversion, cost savings

- **Health and Environmental Benefits**

- Reduced exposure to pollutants from incineration and landfill
- Reduced litter and pest risks in food insecure communities

- **Scoring System Recommendation**

- Include source reduction metrics and cost savings in RFP evaluation criteria

---

## III. ReThink Disposable's Capacity and Contribution to Waste Diversion

- **Current Capacity and Reach**

- Ability to scale with more funding and staff
- Existing infrastructure for outreach, technical assistance, and monitoring

- **Recycling and Diversion Impact**

- Prevention of waste before it enters collection system
- Supports long-term reduction without new hauling infrastructure

- **Complementary to Existing Services**

- Reduces strain on recycling and composting systems
  - Engages small businesses unable to invest in diversion alone
-

#### IV. Barriers and Recommendations for City Support

- **Barriers**

- Upfront costs for small businesses
- Lack of public awareness about source reduction benefits
- Need for technical support and regulatory clarity

- **City Support Needed**

- Funding for grants/incentives to participants
  - Integration with Clean and Green outreach
  - Contracting mechanisms to support source reduction alongside diversion
- 

#### V. Zero Waste and Safe, Clean & Green Recommendations

- **Innovative Strategies**

- Source reduction as top-tier zero waste strategy
- Public/private partnerships to reduce packaging waste
- Education for long-term behavior change

- **Scalable Models**

- Expansion across City agencies, food relief programs, schools
  - Potential to align with other waste goals like curbside composting
- 

#### VI. Additional Considerations

- **Community Empowerment**

- Equitable approach that uplifts EJ communities and small businesses
- **Workforce Development**
  - Job creation through program expansion
- **National Best Practices**
  - Learnings from California and New Jersey implementation