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UAF eliminates meal trays in conservation effort

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Photo by [Johnny Wagner](#)

FAIRBANKS — Students will be carefully maneuvering around the Lola Tilly Commons this semester at the University of Alaska Fairbanks.

UAF has eliminated trays from the dining hall in a bid to curb food waste and trash. But UAF isn't alone in the move — the school is one of 230 colleges served by Sodexo, a food services and facilities management company, that are expected to shelve their trays.

Robert Holden, associate director of auxiliary and business services and dining services at UAF, said a weeklong blind test was conducted last semester to see if going trayless would cut down on waste. The dining hall eliminated 50 percent of its waste during the test period.

Jeff Pellissier, resident dining manager, said the test found UAF Dining Services was throwing out 80 gallons of food per day before getting rid of the trays. Without trays, an average of 35 gallons of food was thrown out each day during the testing period. There are 1,000 students on meal plans at UAF, and dining services serves 1,200 to 1,500 meals every weekday.

Pellissier said hungry students usually have eyes bigger than their stomach and load their trays up but a dining hall without trays will give students a little more food for thought.

“You get a plate of food, satiate yourself, and you have time to think about a second plate,” he said.

Colleges across the nation are also finding trayless meals mean using less resources. Dining halls use five times more energy and water than any other square foot of a campus, said Sodexo spokeswoman Monica Zimmer to the Associated Press.

The same report states 18,000-student Georgia Tech saved 3,000 gallons of water on average per day without trays. The 2,000-student University of Maine at Farmington will save 288,000 gallons annually, and the 50,000-student University of Florida will save 470,000 gallons.

Holden said saving water and heat is a bonus of going trayless, but UAF's main reason was to reduce food waste. Forgoing trays is one of many programs the university is implementing as it tries to become more eco-friendly. University officials are also looking at converting used cooking oil into biodiesel and composting, Holden said.

Margaret Ransdell-Green, a junior at UAF, said she was expecting a tray because they had been there previous years. She found carrying her food to her seat was harder but not a big problem.

Sustainability is a priority for Ransdell-Green, and she said the benefit of not having trays outweighs the convenience.

"It's just a small inconvenience," she said.

Bruce Powell III, an exchange student from New Hampshire also said not having a tray didn't bother him.

"It's just another thing to wash, and it wastes water," he said.

Pellissier said the money saved from not throwing away food will be used to upgrade food quality and the dining experience. Students will benefit from better-quality food, and there will be an increase in special dinner nights.

As for the trays, Pellissier said they have a fun destination ahead of them — the hill near Beluga Field. The trays will become sleds for "Tilly boarding," a wintertime activity where students sled down the hill atop the trays.

"We're trying to show sustainability can be fun and not just inconvenient," Pellissier said.