



MEETING DATE: December 12, 2024

FROM: Debbie Ramirez

RE: Compostable Plastics Update

BACKGROUND:

At the November 14 MAC meeting, Councilmember Lonnie Lazar shared feedback from community members regarding local restaurants using compostable to-go containers. It was noted that Recology currently lacks the equipment to process compostable plastics, recommending instead that they be disposed of in the trash.

Lazar suggested that if Recology had the proper equipment, the compostable plastics could be converted into soil, aligning with sustainability goals.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

Recology does not allow compostable plastics in the green bin because there are currently no compost facilities in this part of the state that accept it. In a municipal compost stream it is usually indistinguishable from normal non compostable plastics and ends up having to be removed as a contaminate or results in more rejected loads. Additionally, most of these plastics that are marketed as compostable require a much higher temperature and longer time during the composting process than the compost sites are set up for.

FINDINGS:

Debbie Ramirez, Clerk, reached out to Brandon Hart with Public Infrastructure and Xinci Tan with Zero Waste Sonoma who provided the following information:

- Most of the contracts that Recology holds in Sonoma County are primarily for transportation of waste (grey, blue, and green bins). Recology does not operate any of the composting facilities that process the food, yard debris, and other green bin material that Sonoma County residents and businesses produce. Therefore, it is not Recology's fault compostable plastics are not allowed in the green bin.
- This rule against compostable plastics is in place because the compost facilities do not want them.

- The biggest reason for this rule is: compostable plastics look very similar to petroleum-based plastics. If you imagine a plastic-looking fork, cup, or plate sticking out of a 20 ton pile of food, it's not feasible for a compost facility worker to stop and check whether every item they see is truly compostable. It's simply easier to assume plastic is plastic and remove it as trash.

- o Many food packaging products are not clearly labeled whether they are truly compostable, and even more products claim they are compostable when they are not. For example, I've seen cups that are colored green but are #6 plastic, the same as Styrofoam. There are state laws around product labeling, but they are extremely hard to enforce.

- o Here is an [example](#) of a compostable cup with absolutely no label. Someone drinking out of this cup will assume it's plastic, as will a worker at a compost facility.

- o No one likes microplastic in their compost. If the facility doesn't remove plastic at the beginning when they are still in large pieces, the plastic breaks into smaller pieces, and there's no magnet to remove plastic.

- The second biggest reason for this rule is that compost facilities, especially in California, generally strive to produce compost to sell to organic farms and agriculture. Compostable plastic products are considered synthetic, and if a compost facility accepts them, they lose their USDA/CDFG organic certification and lose their customers.

- For compostable plastics, it's true they don't break down as easily even if they were truly compostable and given all the right conditions. That's simply a necessary evil because food packaging's primary function is to be sturdy enough to preserve or hold food and drink. You don't want a fork to break when trying to stab a tomato, nor do you want a paper plate to collapse with moisture. Generally compostable plastic products take twice as long to decompose at a compost facility than food or yard debris.

For those who are interested in diving deeper, here's an [article](#) that gets into the nitty gritty. To summarize, the state sent out a survey to compost facilities in California about compostable plastics in 2023. "Of the 24 responses, 20 facilities stated that plastic and plastic-containing materials are treated as contamination and are screened out. The other four facilities responded that they accept plastic bags claimed to be compostable. No other plastic or plastic-containing materials are composted by any of the facilities that responded." In other words, even the facilities that accept compostable plastics use equipment to remove those items as trash before the food is composted.
