



# A Message from Composters Serving Oregon:

## Why We Don't Want Compostable Packaging and Serviceware

Every year, the Pacific Northwest's compost industry turns hundreds of thousands of tons of yard and food wastes into nutrient-rich compost for agriculture, nurseries, landscaping businesses and home gardens. The quality compost products that we create develop healthier and more resilient soil, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, recycle nutrients, conserve water, and may reduce the use of synthetic fertilizers, pesticides and herbicides.

"Compostable" packaging and serviceware items have been on the rise for the past decade and they are increasingly ending up in our facilities. These materials compromise our composting programs and limit many of the environmental benefits of successful composting.

### Here are nine reasons why we don't want "compostable" packaging or serviceware delivered to our facilities:

- 1 They don't always compost:** Not all 'certified' compostable items will actually compost (break down) as fully or quickly as we need them to. This is because certification standards test compostability based on laboratory conditions. Those conditions are not always replicated in the real world (our facilities) which means that some "compostable" items don't fully compost. The result is a finished compost that is contaminated with bits of partially degraded "compostable" material.
- 2 Contamination happens:** As a consumer, you may sort properly – but your neighbor might not. When collection programs accept compostable products, non-compostable look-alike items inevitably end up in the mix. These materials then must be removed, either at the start (when we receive them) or at the end (as pieces of garbage mixed in with finished compost). Either way, this contamination increases our operating costs and degrades the quality of our product, which makes the compost industry less economically viable.
- 3 They hurt resale quality:** We don't want to produce finished compost that is contaminated with fragments of packaging and serviceware, and our consumers won't purchase contaminated material. Contamination lowers the value of our product, making it difficult and sometimes impossible to sell. When fewer people use compost, its environmental benefits aren't realized.
- 4 We can't sell to organic farmers:** Farmers often use compost in the production of certified organic foods. National standards prohibit the use of many different packaging materials when making compost used to grow crops certified as "USDA Organic". Accepting packaging and serviceware at our facilities hinders our ability to provide finished compost to organic farmers.
- 5 They may threaten human and environmental health:** Compostable packaging can contain chemicals that can transfer into finished compost. For example, some paper items have commonly been treated with a class of chemicals called perfluorinated alkyl substances (PFAS) to provide water and grease resistance. PFAS is persistent in the environment, can transfer from compost to ground and surface waters, can be taken up by plants from compost, and may have negative health impacts – affecting child development, reducing fertility, disrupting hormones, affecting the immune system, and increasing risks of cancer. While PFAS is being voluntarily phased out by some producers, it has not been outlawed, and may continue to be used in products that end up at our facilities. Separately, non-degraded fragments of plastic packaging can contaminate finished compost, intensifying environmental health concerns when it is used by buyers. We want to keep our compost clean and safe for all.

- 6 It increases our costs and makes our job harder:** Some of us have accepted compostable packaging in the past, and found that loads of compostable packaging require us to change our processes, adding water, using more energy and spending additional resources to produce finished compost. Some types of compostable packaging mostly degrade into carbon dioxide and water and leave behind little of value for all of the extra effort required.
- 7 Just because something is compostable doesn't mean it's better for the environment.** Oregon DEQ has found that compostable serviceware often has a larger (life time) environmental footprint than non-compostable items\*. For example, compostable materials may require more fossil energy use, release more greenhouse gases, or result in more ecological toxins than their non-compostable counterparts, mostly due to how they're made. The research confirms what scientists already know: that *what materials are made of, and how they're made, may be more significant than whether they're composted vs. landfilled.* "Composting" and "compostable" are not the same idea. Composting is a beneficial treatment option for organic wastes, but "compostable" is not a guarantee of low impact.
- 8 In some cases, the benefits of recycling surpass those of composting.** Some items, like paper bags, can be either composted or recycled. Generally speaking, the recycling of manufactured materials (such as packaging) back into new products or packaging can provide greater overall environmental benefits than composting does.
- 9 Good intentions aren't being realized.** Compostable items often cost more – sometimes up to five times as much as non-compostable alternatives. That's a lot of money spent on products that might not actually help the environment – money that could be spent in more productive and beneficial ways.

Not only do compostable products often cost more to purchase, they also drive up the costs to operate our facilities and impede our ability to sell finished compost. Compostable packaging is promoted as a means of achieving "zero waste" goals but it burdens composters (and recyclers) with materials that harm our ability to efficiently process recovered materials. Reusable dishware is almost always a better choice for the environment. If you must use single-use items, please don't put them in your compost bin.

We need to focus on recycling organic wastes, such as food and yard trimmings, into high-quality compost products that can be used with confidence to restore soils and conserve resources. Compostable packaging doesn't help us to achieve these goals. We need clean feedstocks in order to produce quality compost.

Please help us protect the environment and create high quality compost products by keeping "compostable" packaging and serviceware out of the compost bin.

Thanks for your cooperation!



\*See <https://www.oregon.gov/deq/FilterDocs/compostable.pdf>