



The Challenges of Compostable Packaging

Businesses, government entities, and individuals in California and across the country are seeking to conserve resources and reduce the environmental impacts associated with the landfilling of food scraps. To that end many of them have begun to utilize compostable food service packaging – often in conjunction with policies and ordinances mandating their purchase and use. Most often the implementation of policies and practices which endorse compostable packaging have not been established in consultation with the commercial compost manufacturers who receive these materials, or may have begun with no available composting capacity at all. ***Packaging and products made from compostable materials are not welcome at a majority of compost manufacturing facilities, especially those products which are not directly associated with food scrap recovery.***

While many facilities have continued to receive and process a mix of food scraps and compostable packaging, an increasing number of compost manufacturers are excluding the packaging as an acceptable feedstock for their operations: ***the vast majority of compostable packaging collected is sorted out and landfilled.*** Compostable packaging has issues which have negatively impacted compost manufacturers in the following areas:

- **Identification: *Compostable packaging acts as a Trojan horse for contamination*** – it is difficult or impossible to identify compostable packaging and discern it from conventional materials. At most facilities that pre-process feedstocks, compostable packaging is sorted out and disposed of with other contaminants.
- **Performance: *Compostable packaging may or may not degrade properly during the composting process due to variability in the material composition or the type of composting technology employed,*** despite meeting ASTM standards (D6400 or D6868) for compostability, causing contamination of the compost products, often with a multitude of microfragments typically remaining from heavier gauge containers and utensils.
- **Organic Status and Chemical Contamination: *Compostable packaging is typically composed of synthetic materials, particularly compostable plastics, like PLA, which are not approved for use as organic inputs,*** meaning compost manufacturers are sacrificing the marketability of their compost product. Numerous compostable fiber foodservice products have been identified as containing significant amounts of fluorine compounds (PFOS, PFAS, or others used as a grease barrier) which persist through the composting process. Biodegradable Products Institute (BPI) has implemented a policy, whereby they will no longer certify these compostable fiber products if they contain excessive fluorine levels, beginning in January 2020. BPI, however, does not certify all products in the market.

Until the above issues are resolved to a significant degree, the value promise of compostable packaging as a significant contributor to food scrap recovery efforts will be impaired and the ability to expand programs which include packaging – and to develop infrastructure which can produce clean, high-value compost products – will be impacted. To be clear, compostable packaging which is not directly related to food scrap recovery has little to no value to compost manufacturers; recycling options for those materials need to be developed as a preferred option for truly sustainable recovery from landfill.