

Compostable? Not so fast | Stanford Daily

Students and administrators are raising doubts about the effectiveness of compostable silverware in reducing campus waste in advance of an ASSU Executive push to increase its use.

Out at Newby Island Organics Compost Facility, microbes are hard at work — on Stanford's compostable waste. In long compost piles called "windrows," the microbes chew away at materials that include the grass clippings from campus lawns and the spinach leaves from that salad you couldn't finish. More and more frequently, compostable cutlery, dishes and bags are showing up in these piles.

ASSU President David Gobaud '08, M.S. '10 has said University administrators hope to replace serviceware at Tresidder Union and Old Union with compostable alternatives by winter quarter, but doubts remain among administrators and even among student leaders.

Julie Muir, the manager of Peninsula Sanitary Service, Inc. (PSSI), which handles Stanford's waste, agrees wholeheartedly with the University's zero-waste goal, but wonders if compostable dishware is the right way to achieve it. She said she wonders whether compostable serviceware creates more problems than it solves.

ASSU Green Store Manager Susan Choi '12 also said the store has been "wary" of offering compostable products.

"We haven't really figured out a way to ensure that students dispose of compostables properly," Choi wrote in an e-mail to The Daily, because even when bins are provided, they are easily contaminated with non-compostable items.

Lauren Kubiak '10, who journeyed around the country this summer investigating food waste, said many restaurants she visited "had [disposable] cutlery and cups, but they didn't have a compost bin." If compostable products are used without easy access to a compost receptacle, she said, they are thrown away.

Then there's the challenge of a successful compost process, as Muir and others explained.

Compost from campus, including Tresidder, is driven to the Newby Island Organics Compost Facility. There, large contaminants, like bags of garbage, are removed by workers, and the rest is sent through a chipper and then piled into the windrows. The compost matures and then is sold back to the University, or to local landscapers and gardeners.

Remaining waste in the compost is removed by a machine called a trammel screen, then sent to a landfill.

At the nearby Sonoma Compost Company, a more rigorous sorting process takes place before compost piles are formed. Owner Alan Siegle said their organic certification forbids the inclusion of most biocompostable products. The compost must be sorted by hand.

According to Will Bakx, co-owner and soil scientist, even if biocompostables were allowed, they would be impossible to sort because they are nearly indistinguishable from plastic.

Biocompostibles are carefully designed to seem very similar to the disposable silverware most consumers are used to. Kimberly Pointer, marketing manager for World Centric, a Palo Alto-based company that sells biocompostables, says their major selling point is that they are made from corn and wheat straw, not fossil fuels.

Despite their agricultural origins, some compostable cutlery sold by World Centric can withstand temperatures of up to 200 degrees Fahrenheit.

"We want them to be both durable and renewable," Pointer said.

This durability can make compostables difficult to degrade. World Centric's Web site estimates that it may take six months in a commercial facility for these products to be processed, and up to two years in a backyard pile.

That's too long, Bakx said, as his piles only develop for 10 to 14 weeks.

Muir said that even at Newby Island, where windrows decompose for six months, some utensils might remain.

“Composting is a science, but it’s also a natural process,” she said. “If a fork ends up in the middle of the windrow, it will decompose. But what happens to the fork that’s only an inch under the surface? It might not.”

Muir estimated that only a small fraction of Newby Island’s compost is removed through this process — two percent by weight or 10 percent by volume — and only a portion of this is made up of biocompostables. Still, she finds compostables a less desirable option than recyclable or reusable cutlery.

Siegle agrees that one-use products are inherently wasteful.

“It’s misleading to think that switching from one non-reusable bag to another throw-away product [will help],” he said.

Bakx added that compostable and biodegradable products might have value, if only “to increase organic diversion out of the waste stream.”

He explained that having large compostable bags might make it easier for people to manage their food waste.

Meanwhile, back at Stanford, some are taking the compostable question into their own hands.

After returning from her cross-country food-waste investigation, Kubiak decided to test the compostability of several “compostable” products in a garden compost pile. Working with Stanford Farm Educator Sarah Wiederkehr, Kubiak placed a biodegradable plastic bag, cup, fork, knife and paper cup in one of the Stanford Community Farm’s compost piles. They plan to check the pile periodically in the coming months, but both women are sure they’ll find everything just as it was.

“The utensils are the ones I am most suspicious of,” Wiederkehr said. “Those things never break down.” Wiederkehr said she has picked out intact forks by hand from her compost pile in the past.

For now, Muir said that contained anaerobic composting units may be better at processing compostables in the future because their conditions are more easily controlled than outdoor windrows.

Until then, not every compostable knife and spoon can end up in someone’s flowerbed.