

Understanding Compostable Plastics

Are compostable plastics sticking a fork in the gears of commercial composting operations?

A USDN Innovation Fund project gathered data and developed educational resources to connect information about compostable plastics between the private and public sectors.

As more composting facilities are built and operationalized across North America, more compostable plastic products like forks, plates, and cups are commercially available. This alternative to disposable plastics is a helpful choice for shoppers and restaurant diners. But for another important user, it is not that simple. Right now, compostable plastics have few industry standards for material composition. Further complicating the effective use and disposal of compostable plastics are the variability between compost facilities in their processing methods and the types of materials they can compost. To learn more about how these variables impact city waste reduction efforts, **San Jose** pulled together a city team including **Asheville** and **Gaithersburg**, along with partners Biocycle and the U.S. Composting Council. This team surveyed the range of players in this arena and created a toolkit to educate and increase understanding of the challenges and opportunities associated with compostable plastics.

At the start of this project, the team surveyed 153 people. They were primarily from local governments, with some participation from private solid waste companies. A key lesson learned: Compostable plastics are widely used in the United States and abroad. Use is not focused on the west coast, nor does any community stand out as a major user over peers. This project also confirmed that a wide discrepancy in knowledge exists surrounding the use of compostable plastics. To address this discrepancy, this project created an [interactive online toolkit](#) functioning as a practitioner education resource about compostable plastics.

The toolkit is designed to provide solid waste practitioners, like community recycling coordinators, the opportunity to educate themselves about compostable plastics, including how to properly manage them, and then determine if a compostable plastics program is appropriate for their organization. These resources are organized into 5 clear categories to help users more easily locate information: 1) Backgrounds and Definitions; 2) Policies and Legislation; 3) Education and Outreach; 4) Analysis and Field Research; and 5) Certified and Accepted Products.

The interactive toolkit allows users to provide feedback, rate tools, and submit tools they feel are missing. The intent of this interaction is to ensure that as the industry evolves, the information in the toolkit evolves with it. Communications received after unveiling a draft version of the toolkit at the U.S. Composting Council Conference indicate this meets a need for credible information on Compostable Plastics and can provide neutrality and value to the conversation.