

Your Watershed by RRWA Compostable Plastics: A Waste?

Most of us will agree that the use of compostable plastic (CP) products is preferred over conventional plastics. However, are CPs truly compostable? Will these products eliminate the plastic pollution that we see in our local creeks and river? Is it sustainable to substitute our dependence on single-use plastic with a CP made from plant products grown on land fit for food production requiring large amounts of water, fertilizer and pesticides?



In response to calls for waste reduction, pollution prevention, energy conservation, and greenhouse gas reduction, much attention has been on the reduction, if not a ban, of plastic bags. The City of San Francisco recently banned conventional plastic bags certain in grocery stores. Many other cities and counties, including those in Sonoma County, are considering following suit. CP

bags appear to be a reasonable, though expensive, alternative. Whole Foods, Trader Joe's, and Wal-Mart are among retail outlets that are now carrying CP bags, utensils and packaging materials. [Sonoma Compost Co](#), Sonoma County's facility which composts most of the yard debris and vegetative food discards, is often questioned to compost these products. Unfortunately, these products are not accepted at Sonoma Compost Co.

Three identified barriers exist with CPs, which currently prevent these products from being composted. They are: the rate of decomposition, no easy differentiation from conventional plastic, and exclusion from compost for organic agriculture.

The compostable plastics industry has done a great job in mimicking conventional plastic. A problem arises though when we try to sort plastic out of the raw material for compost. In the process of removing plastics, the CPs will be removed as well. Unless there is a clear identification system, CPs are seen as conventional plastic and sorted out as garbage. In addition, CP in recycled plastic reduces the quality of the finished product, so there too it is considered a contaminant. Meanwhile, a compostable plastic bag blows away just as easy as a conventional bag. They pollute our land, streams, and oceans with a lifetime of 100 to 1,000 years.

Additionally, the National Organic Program (NOP) does not allow synthetics to be composted. Unless the NOP reviews the compatibility of CPs and allows these products to be composted under their program rules, facilities that produce compost to meet organic standards cannot accept these products.

There are no easy solutions to replace the habits of using a plastic bag at the grocery store and plastic food utensils. We can all agree that the use of plastic contributes to pollution and is not sustainable. As energy prices go up and oil supplies become more limited, reusable canvas bags and good old plates, cups, and silverware again make a lot of sense.

This article was authored by Will Bakx of the Sonoma Compost Company, LLC (www.sonomacompost.com) on behalf of RRWA. RRWA is an association of local public agencies in the Russian River Watershed that have come together to coordinate regional programs for clean water, fisheries restoration, and watershed enhancement.