



Recycle at Work

COMPOSTABLE PLASTICS

New containers that look like conventional plastics but are labeled “biodegradable,” “compostable” or “polylactic acid (PLA)” have appeared in delis, grocery stores and fast-food restaurants. As well-meaning businesses work to green their practices, many are turning to these new, often corn-based products, called “bioplastics.”

Bioplastics cause problems for recyclers

Bioplastics present a problem for the local recycling and composting industries. These new plastics often look like regular, petroleum-based plastics, making it difficult for consumers to distinguish between the two materials. When bioplastics end up in the recycling stream, they can cause expensive problems for plastics recycling.

What to look for when choosing plastic products

- Watch for containers and bags labeled “compostable,” “biodegradable” or “PLA.”
- Keep bioplastic containers OUT of curbside recycling and yard debris roll carts and other plastics recycling programs. Mixing

these materials together causes problems for conventional plastics and yard debris processors.

- If you do have a bioplastics container, dispose of it with your trash. Compostable plastics do not break down in home composting systems and may not be suitable for commercial composting facilities.
- Whenever possible, opt out of disposable containers. Carry a durable coffee mug or water bottle and bring your own takeout container to restaurants.
- Purchase locally made foods or grow your own produce to avoid the need for packaging for transportation and storage.

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Fact sheets were created by Metro and your local governments to help reduce waste in the business sector. Printed on recycled paper. 09150



Recycle at Work
from Metro and your local governments

The environmental benefits of bioplastics vs. petroleum-based plastics

It's important to weigh potential gains against new problems the bioplastic material may cause and to consider whether the stated benefits are real. Does the switch save or use more natural resources and energy? Does it reduce or increase the greenhouse gas emissions that contribute to climate change?

Consider the following issues related to the use of bioplastics:

- Landfill decomposition increases greenhouse gas emissions. When biodegradable materials break down in a landfill, they create methane, a greenhouse gas more potent than carbon dioxide. Some landfill facilities are turning methane into energy, but the current technology can capture only a small amount of the methane produced.
- Bioplastics will not decompose. Not all bioplastic products have been tested for commercial composting. Some of the bioplastics that have been tested were found to successfully decompose in a commercial compost facility. Others did not decompose.
- Bioplastics require fossil fuels for production. Corn-based plastics will not remove the need for petroleum to make the container. Corn production requires soil-management machinery, fertilizers and pesticides – all of which are petroleum intensive. Converting the corn to bioplastics often uses fossil fuels.

Source

Adapted from the City of Portland Bureau of Planning and Sustainability fact sheet