

# The Scoop on Compostable Plastic



## Master Recycler Newsletter

*(Adapted from the Portland Metro Master Recycler Newsletter)*

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

It may initially appear that disposable containers made from corn instead of traditional natural gas or oil should have environmental benefits. When considering the use of any new “green” material, consumers must ask whether the environmental benefits are real. We must also weigh potential gains against new problems the material may cause. It is important to ask if such a switch saves or uses more natural resources and energy and whether it reduces or increases carbon emissions to curb climate

change. There is little evidence that the use of bioplastics in place of petroleum-based plastics for take out or disposable containers is any more beneficial for the environment than any other disposable container.

Consider the following issues:

- *Landfill size:* There is little relevant data that bioplastics will break down in a landfill. It takes air and water to decompose materials, neither of which is present in today’s contained landfills. Paper has proven to break down very slowly in the same environment. In Marion County, garbage isn’t even sent to a landfill but is instead burned in a Waste-to-Energy facility.
- *Landfill decomposition increases greenhouse gas emissions:* When biodegradable mate-

rials do break down in a landfill, they create methane, a more potent greenhouse gas than carbon dioxide. It is important to reduce materials that break down in a landfill—not increase them.

- *Consumer’s ability to compost bioplastic containers:* Home compost does not reach necessary temperatures to break down bioplastic. For bioplastics to decompose, they must be sent to a commercial compost facility. However, consumers in Marion County do not have direct access to a commercial composting facility.
- *Bioplastics in a compost facility:* Not all bioplastic products have been tested for commercial composting.

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### Quote of the Month

*“Determine never to be idle. No person will have occasion to complain of the want of time, who never loses any. It is wonderful how much may be done, if we are always doing.”*

*- Thomas Jefferson*

# Introducing our new Waste Reduction Coordinator

Alan Pennington is another new addition to the Public Works staff. He will be working as a waste reduction coordinator. Alan will take the lead on promoting the Environmental Services Division's waste reduction, recycling and composting programs. He will help expand recycling/composting programs at various community events and he will also help home remodelers, contractors, and architects to use green building techniques.



Welcome Alan Pennington

Alan brings a wealth of experience to the department. He has been a science teacher in such exciting locales

as Indonesia (2 years), Spain (8 years), and exotic Dayton, Oregon (4 years). Alan was also the natural resources outreach specialist for 5 years at the City of Salem, so some of you have known Alan for some time. If you haven't met him yet, please swing by the Environmental Services offices on Silverton Road to introduce yourself.

Alan can be reached at 503-365-3188 or by email at [apennington@co.marion.or.us](mailto:apennington@co.marion.or.us).

## Compostable Plastics (continued)

(continued from page 1)

Some bioplastics have been tested to successfully decompose in a compost facility; others have not successfully decomposed.

- **Bioplastics value to compost:** Biomass in compost comes from breaking down the cell walls of woody or food material. Polylactic acid is a simple sugar molecule that is digested quickly and provides little mass to the compost.
- **Ocean plastic pollution:** Oceans do not reach the temperatures necessary to break the bioplastics down. Bioplastics will collect in oceans in the same way that other plastics do now.
- **Recycling issues:** Bioplastics are not recyclable with regular plastics. Because they are difficult for consumers to distinguish from regular plastics, they can cause expensive problems for plastics recycling.
- **Energy and greenhouse gas comparison:** Recent life-cycle analysis studies evaluated the energy use and greenhouse gas emis-

sions associated with production, transportation and disposal of bio- and petroleum-based products and found little difference between the two.

- **US dependence on petroleum:** Corn-based plastics will not remove the need for petroleum to make the container. Corn production requires soil management for petroleum to make the container. Corn production requires soil management machinery, fertilizers and pesticides, all of which are petroleum intensive.
- **Land for packaging:** According to National Geographic, 6 billion people depend on 11 percent of the earth's land surface to produce food. Do we really want to use it for packaging?

With quickly decreasing resources and an immediate need to address climate change, we can no longer afford disposable containers whether they are made of paper, plastic or corn. Instead of seeking new materi-

als for packaging, there is an urgent need to use all that creative energy to truly think outside of the paper/plastic/bioplastic box.

### Be a Good Consumer!

- Watch for containers and bags labeled "compostable," "biodegradable" or PLA. They often have the #7 on them.
  - Do not place bioplastic containers in plastics recycling programs. Mixing the two materials together causes problems for petroleum plastics recycling.
- Opt out of all disposable containers. Bring your own durable coffee mug and water bottle, bring your own container to restaurants for take away and leftovers.
- Purchase locally made foods or grown your own to avoid the need for packaging for transportation and storage.

***"Bioplastics are not recyclable with other plastics."***

# Marion County Transfer Station Rate Increase

The Marion County Board of Commissioners recently approved an increase in the minimum charge for garbage customers at the Marion County Recycling and Transfer Stations. The rate will go from a \$9 to \$13 minimum on October 1, 2008 and then from \$13 to \$15 on October 1, 2009. The minimum charge for yard debris and wood waste did not change, and will remain \$9 per transaction. These changes do not impact the Brown's Island Demolition Landfill. As always, most recycling

services at the Marion County transfer stations remain free.

The rates at the transfer stations



*Minimum rates at Marion County transfer stations to increase.*

have not increased since 1992 while other out-of-county disposal sites have risen substantially over the years. Marion County's lower minimum charge has created an incentive for out-of-county waste to be disposed of at the Marion County transfer stations. Increasing the minimum charge will likely reduce the number of out-of-county minimum charge customers that visit the transfer stations.

## Events and Announcements

### HHW Collection Event– Stayton September 27, 2008

Four volunteers are needed to help with an upcoming HHW collection event to be held in the Ross/Bi-Mart (Shaff Rd.) parking lot in Stayton. Two volunteers are needed for the 8:30 a.m.– noon shift and the noon– 3:00 p.m. shift. If you would like to volunteer for this event please contact Alan Pennington at 503-365-3188 or [apennington@co.marion.or.us](mailto:apennington@co.marion.or.us).

### Solid Waste Management Plan Public Workshop– September 22, 2008

There will be a Solid Waste Management Plan waste disposal options public workshop on Monday, September 22nd, 6:30 pm at South Salem High School Library (1910 Church St. SE, Salem).

The public is welcomed and encouraged to attend.

### Backyard Burn Ban Public Hearing October 8, 2008

There will be a public hearing for the proposed Backyard Burn Ban ordinance for the Salem & Keizer urban growth boundaries on Wednesday, October 8, 2008 at 9:30 am in the Senator Hearing Room of Courthouse Square (555 Court St. NE, Salem).

*“Volunteers are needed for a HHW collection event in Stayton in September.”*

## Goodbye from Kim

Hello Master Recyclers! It has been so wonderful getting to know each of you and watching you share your dedication and passion for waste reduction and recycling with the community. It has been truly inspiring working with such a dedicated group of volunteers and has made my time working here at Marion County so very enjoyable. My last day working with the county will be September 12th.

I've taken a job near my home as the Sustainability Coordinator with the City of Portland Water Bureau. I'm excited to start this new chapter in my life but will miss working with you! Please keep in touch– I'll have my new contact information posted in the newsletter as soon as I know it. Your new Master Recycler Coordinator will be Bailey Payne and he can be reached at [bpayne@co.marion.or.us](mailto:bpayne@co.marion.or.us) or by

phone at 503-588-5169 ext. 5991. Please direct all volunteer hour reporting to Bailey. Thank you again for all of your hard work and dedication to the Master Recycler program!



Master Recycler Coordinator Leaving



**Marion County**  
OREGON

**MARION COUNTY PUBLIC WORKS-  
ENVIRONMENTAL SERVICES**

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***You can make a difference!***



**We're on the web!**

[www.co.marion.or.us/pw/es](http://www.co.marion.or.us/pw/es)

## Green Building Workshops

Cascadia Green Building Council will be hosting half-day classes that presents a complete, step-by-step process for managing the construction of the LEED Rating System projects from preconstruction to documentation. Designed for construction managers, general contractors, subcontractors, construction companies, and builders.

Both of the following workshops cover one of the tenets of green building– the Integrated Design Process. The first is an introductory class, while the second is delivered at a more advanced level.

### Workshop 1

Integrated Design Process: An Introduction to the IDP and Design Synergies– Sept. 9 in Eugene, October 1st in Portland and October 7 in Medford.

If you would like more information about location and costs of these workshops or if you would like to register, contact Jenny Seifert at: [jenny@cascadiagbc.org](mailto:jenny@cascadiagbc.org) or 503-228-5533 or visit [www.cascadiagbc.org](http://www.cascadiagbc.org).

### Workshop 2

Integrated Design Process: How to Facilitate an IDP– September 10 in Eugene and October 2 in Portland.



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REGION GREEN BUILDING COUNCIL