



COMPOSTABLE PLASTIC
DOES IT WORK IN PORTLAND?

New containers that look like conventional plastics but are labeled "biodegradable," "compostable" or "Polylactic Acid (PLA)" have been 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, called "bioplastics."

In Portland, bioplastics present a problem for the local recycling and composting industries. Bioplastics often look like regular 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.

Be a thoughtful consumer!

- **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 end up with 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 to help reduce waste.**
- **Purchase locally made foods or grow your own produce to avoid the need for packaging for transportation and storage.**

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Are bioplastics better for the environment than petroleum-based plastics?

As eco-conscious consumers, it is important to weigh potential gains against new problems the 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:

- **Landfill decomposition increases greenhouse gas emissions.** When biodegradable materials break down in a landfill, they create methane, a more potent greenhouse gas than carbon dioxide. Some landfill facilities are turning methane into energy, but the current technology is only able to capture a small amount of the methane produced.
- **Consumers have limited ability to compost bioplastic containers.** Home compost does not reach the temperatures necessary to break down bioplastic. In order for bioplastics to decompose, they must be sent to a commercial composting facility.
- **Bioplastics may 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.
- **Pollution in oceans is an issue.** Oceans do not reach the temperatures necessary to break down bioplastics. As bioplastic debris collects in oceans and waterways, it creates pollution.
- **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.
- **Fertile land is used for packaging.** Six billion people depend on 11 percent of the earth's land surface to produce food. Shifting land use to produce packaging could further increase the world's hunger problems.

Think outside of the disposable box!

Carry your own reusable mugs and bottles when you go out.

City of Portland Bureau of
Planning and Sustainability
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