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Burying Organics Stinks: The Compost Solution

Future superfund sites

One of the best kept secrets about [landfills](#) today is that they only delay rather than prevent environmental contamination. The reason: in the U.S. we are perpetuating the obsolete practice of discarding decomposable matter – things like unrecovered paper, food scraps and yard trimmings – in the ground, along with the substantial toxic loadings that are a part of our waste.

This makes the landfill biologically active for centuries, and leads to intractable problems for two reasons. First, their decay creates the greenhouse gas, methane, which also transports other hazardous volatile organic compounds in our waste into the atmosphere, and transforms elemental mercury from discarded batteries and switches into its lethal nerve gas form, di-methyl mercury. Second, as those organic materials decompose, they also leach carcinogenic compounds out of the waste load and, after the liners deteriorate, through the ground into our grandchildren's drinking water supplies.

Waste as resource

What's the first essential step to protecting the environment from these hazards in our waste? That's simple. Just like we currently separate our recyclables from our trash in our kitchen for reuse, we need to separate our organic material to be separately collected as well and composted.

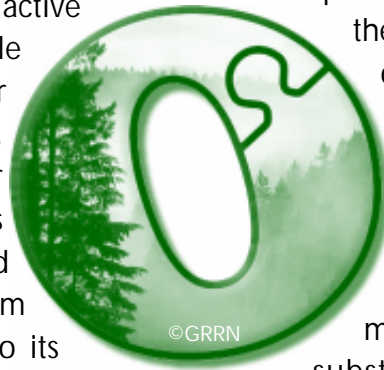
At present vast amounts of organic materials – paper, wood, food waste and yard trimmings – are still being landfilled or incinerated. In fact, organic materials comprise 60 to 65% of the waste going to

municipal waste landfills. These materials not only contaminate 'dry' recyclables, they also produce the methane gas which makes landfills a significant contributor to global warming. No pun intended, but this is truly a terrible waste.

An ancient solution whose time has come: Composting

Implementing systems to divert, collect and recycle the waste stream's organic fraction will not only minimize the hazards associated with landfilling but is a necessary step toward successful local composting programs. Hundreds of successful public as well as private large-scale composting programs exist around the country, naturally manufacturing a product that provides substantial environmental and economic benefits. Additional success will be achieved through the commitment and creativity of local governments combined, where necessary, with higher target recycling rates and landfill bans applied to a broad range of organic materials.

Only a handful of such programs take in diverted residential food wastes. The City and County of San Francisco offers one of the best examples of successful citywide commercial and residential food waste diversion programs. The collected organic materials are transported to a composting facility where they are combined with yard wastes to produce nitrogen-rich compost. Moreover, the food waste collection program has substantially increased the City's recycling rates, thereby reducing its reliance on costly, out-dated landfilling practices.



Take Action

The GrassRoots Recycling Network (GRRN) advocates for increased diversion of organic materials as a way to boost composting and to reduce the amount of waste going to landfills and incinerators. [Producer responsibility](#) is a key tool for achieving community waste reduction goals. In most instances, producer responsibility is linked to take-back requirements for products at the end of their useful life. However, producer responsibility also applies to the long-term environmental and economic consequences of products dispersed into the environment.

A product threatens composting

An example of the need for producer responsibility affecting organic recycling is the herbicide Confront, manufactured and marketed by Dow Chemical's Agrosiences Division.

Confront's active ingredient chlopyralid is a highly persistent toxic chemical that is showing up in compost made, in part, from decomposed grass and agricultural plants treated with the chemical. Compost with Confront residues has damaged or destroyed sensitive plants to which it was subsequently applied. The presence of Confront residues has adversely affected composting operations in Washington state, Pennsylvania and New Zealand, putting millions of dollars of investments at risk.

The existence of a class of herbicides that can undermine marketability of compost products is totally contradictory to all of our goals for recycling, resource conservation and sustainability.

Dow's herbicide poses a grave threat to state and local government programs that promote both backyard and centralized composting as the best management method of dealing with yard trimmings. Composting facility operators have invested millions of dollars in testing and marketing compost products to the public, nurseries and landscapers in order to improve regional soil quality, reduce water consumption demands and improve water quality. Many communities ban the disposal of yard trimmings with

garbage and many states prohibit the disposal of yard trimmings in landfills.

Dow Chemical has refused to acknowledge the significant threat to America's composting industry, resisting efforts to require product labeling and responding that both the costs and responsibility for testing and remediation lie with the affected industry.

Confront Dow now!

GrassRoots Recycling Network, the United States Composting Council, and dozens of other organizations and individuals are demanding that Dow remove this product from the market until its safety to the American composting industry can be demonstrated. Moreover, the *producer* should be held *responsible* for adequate product labeling and for compensating those damaged by the product.

The role and potential influence of local government in this effort can not be understated. The ability to operate safe, effective composting programs and significantly increase recycling rates thereby is directly affected by the use and marketing of these compounds. GRRN invites you to join this effort by voicing your concerns to Dow; you can do so electronically through the GRRN web site by visiting www.grrn.org/dow/index.html.

Advocating Zero Waste: *GrassRoots Recycling Network*

The GrassRoots Recycling Network is a North American network of recycling professionals and waste reduction activists promoting [Zero Waste](#). GRRN is ready to help your community get on the road to Zero Waste... or darn close. GRRN works with communities and businesses across the country to encourage adoption of [Zero Waste Resolutions](#) and development of [Zero Waste Plans](#). GRRN believes that producer responsibility and Zero Waste will happen because local communities and their citizens can make it happen.

For more information, visit www.grrn.org/localgov/

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