Health Precautions for Composting Food Scraps at Rural Community Scale Operations

Diverting food scraps and other organic waste is an essential solid waste management service. During this period of national emergency due to the COVID-19 pandemic, composting keeps organic resources local and makes a valuable soil amendment. Practiced safely, composting brings communities together while allowing social distancing, provides healthy outdoor activity, and fosters other positive activities, including gardening. Adopting simple, low cost, health measures can keep composters safe.

COVID-19 and Community Composting

Generally, the family of viruses that includes COVID-19 is less stable and are destroyed by oxidants, heat and sunlight. Research shows that “hot” composting (131+ °F) kills the other strains of coronaviruses quickly; the time that it takes materials to decompose in any system, including cold composting, allows for natural die-off. Therefore, handling feedstocks that may be contaminated with COVID-19 is the primary concern for composters. Accordingly, precautions focus on practicing good hygiene and using personal protective equipment, especially during the feedstock mixing and turning phases.

General Guidelines & Good Hygiene for Everyone

- **Take the spread of this virus seriously.** Be a steward of your community public health.
- **Stay home** if you don’t feel well in any capacity, or if anyone you have been in close contact with has a fever, chest pain, shortness of breath, coughing, or other flu symptoms.
  - If you don’t feel well, **check your temperature**; any elevation in temperature should result in self-quarantine.
- **Stay hydrated and healthy.** Exposure does not necessarily mean you will contract the virus; if your immune system is in good shape, you will have a good chance of preventing infection. Eating well, getting regular sleep and some exercise will help you stay healthy!
- **Practice good hygiene:**
  - **Wash hands regularly,** especially before and after contact with others and going in and out of public places. Wash with soap and warm water for 20-30 seconds (sing “Happy Birthday” song 2-3 times); vigorous rubbing is recommended. Use hand sanitizer if soap and water are not available.
  - **Wear a (handmade) facemask** when out in public, including at the compost site; handmade masks can be used with or without filter inserts.
  - **Cough or sneeze into your elbow or your shirt** (stick your face into neck hole).
  - **Avoid touching your face** (including your eyes!).
- **Identify and actively prevent exposures**
  - **Practice social distancing (at least 6 feet);** avoid hugging, kissing, fist bumps or hand shaking, sharing food or drinks, etc.
  - **Avoid group gatherings** and non-essential public exposure; limit composters allowed on site to the number who can safely practice social distancing.
  - **Wear protective gear** when appropriate to the task.
- **Understand the virus and how it spreads**
  - This virus spreads more than twice as easily as the regular flu.
  - While the average healthy person is unlikely to become very sick, this virus is more deadly than similar viruses in specific populations, especially the elderly and those with compromised immune systems. People carrying the virus can be contagious long before they have symptoms, and some people never display symptoms.
  - You can become infected through your eyes, nose and mouth.
  - The virus may survive on some surfaces for up to four days.
- **Stay informed,** especially about what is happening in your community. Recommendations for social distancing and use of personal protective equipment (PPE) are changing frequently; stay up to date with recommendations from your local health departments and governments.

**Remember:** Prevention is the only meaningful strategy for containing this pandemic. This requires collective commitment to containment and transmission risk reduction. This is bigger than you; your actions affect your community.
Considerations and precautions for rural community-scale composting:

Please note that this guidance is not intended to override local, state, or national directives. If you have questions specific to your site, please contact your local solid waste management program, health department, or composting association.

The following guidelines are for rural community composting sites where people drop off food scraps and other organics, regardless of the drop-off system. There are different considerations for sites that collect organic materials to bring to a community compost site (hauling).

1. Should you continue to operate your site during the Stay Home-Stay Safe/Shelter in place directives?

- Where are you located?
  - Are there other organic management options in your community?
  - Is there enough space at the community compost site to allow for social distancing?

- Who are your members? (volunteers/staff and people who bring organics to your site)
  - Are many of them in higher-risk demographics?
  - Talk with everyone about their comfort levels in continuing to participate.

It’s okay to choose to temporarily close:
- If you don’t feel your site can be managed safely.
- If too many volunteers are reluctant to work.
- If people stop bringing scraps & the volume doesn’t justify remaining open.

Whatever you chose – be purposeful & make a plan.

Consider the answers to these questions when making decisions about managing your site.

If you decide to close:
- Consider helping identify alternatives for food scraps/organics management (home composting, availability of nearby farms or transfer stations, etc.)
- Put the active compost “to bed”:
  - Ensure that all feedstocks are integrated and capped with a high carbon material, finished compost or soil (depending on the system).
- Ensure that the site is left tidy and secure. Post temporary closure signs. Consider posting no dumping or trespassing signs. Lock entrance gates, if applicable.
- Prepare for possible changes in volunteer/staff availability and food scrap/organics feedstock intake.

If you continue to operate:
- Request that individuals who may be at higher risk, are ill, or have household members who are ill, stay home.
- Prepare for potential temporary closure should that become necessary.

See pages 3-4

Let your members know! Whether you decide to continue to operate or to temporarily close, communicate with everyone involved at the site. Also be sure to let neighbors know—remind them that diverting food scraps and other organic waste is an essential solid waste management service, even in the time of COVID-19, and share your safety protocols with them. Additionally, post signs at the site indicating new protocols or temporary closure.
2. If you decide to continue to operate:

A. Consider changes to drop off procedures

- Stagger material drop-off times to limit the number of people at the site at any given time.

- Mark 6-foot distances around drop-off or other compost system areas as a reminder for social distancing; if needed, stagger available parking spaces so that the recommended social distancing is maintained.

- Ensure that all participants are using disposable or washable gloves and wipe down all points of multiple contact (bin handles, carbon scoops, etc.) after mixing materials into the system.

- Ask participants to place food scraps directly in the Active Composting part of the system.

- Consider use of certified compostable bags (ideally brands certified for home composting, that break down in cold composting), to limit direct exposure to food scraps.

- This includes disposable or washable gloves and face masks, or face shields (homemade masks are preferable to no masks).

B. Personal Protective Equipment

- All participants should wear PPE when handling and mixing raw feedstocks.

- If providing disposable or washable gloves or face masks, establish a protocol for collection and laundering:
  - Gloves should be removed inside out.
  - Place disposable gloves and face masks directly in trash.
  - Place washable gloves and face masks in a bag or bin that can be transferred into a washing machine without further handling. If further handling cannot be avoided, hands should be washed with soap and warm water for 20-30 seconds immediately after handling.

- Ideally, tools and equipment used for feedstock material handling and mixing should not be used for curing, screening, moving, or loading of finished compost products.

- If necessary, due to a limited number of tools, sanitize tools. Dry tools in the sun if possible; this helps to sanitize, but is not adequate on its own.

- Also sanitize all plastic, metal, & other often-touched parts of compost bins, storage bins, tools, and other surfaces which come in contact with food scraps and other feedstocks.

- More training may be needed!

C. Tools & Equipment Considerations

- Guidance on PPE may change – stay informed & up to date!

How to clean & sanitize?

- Soap & warm water are best!
- Household cleaners
- Bleach solutions (1/3 cup per 1-gallon water)
- Alcohol solutions of at least 70% alcohol
- Or other EPA approved sanitizing agent
Composting for Community Resiliency

Composting is a vital part of community infrastructure. It allows all of us to take action for a sustainable future, by reducing methane-generating materials (greenhouse gases) from the landfill. Composting permits communities to control their own recycling of these local organics to make valuable soil amendment.

With precautions and commonsense, home and community composting, along with other options for diverting food scraps (through transfer stations, curbside collection), can continue to be practiced. Each of us, of course, needs to be responsible for our own health, that of our family’s, and our community.

Notes:
The Food and Drug Administration has a list of home cleaning products that are known to kill Covid-19. This virus is an enveloped virus so it doesn’t survive well in soap and alcohol.

US EPA List of Approved Coronavirus Disinfectants: https://www.epa.gov/newsreleases/epa-expands-covid-19-disinfectant-list

This guidance was adapted from a number of sources, including United States Composting Council (USCC), BioCycle, and compost experts.

This guidance was developed with support from a USDA Rural Utilities Services Solid Waste Management Grant. It does not necessarily reflect the opinions or advice of that agency.