

Memorandum to Minister

Information Only: The Importance of Implementing a Federal Regulation on the Usage of the Word “Compostable”

Summary

“Compostable” is not a federally regulated term. While some standards defining the word “Compostable” have been published, there is no federally enforced regulation on the term. This continues to cause confusion and high contamination rates of residential compost. To improve composting rates and quality of compost material to prevent toxic contaminants being consumed via compost material, the term “compostable” must be clear to a national audience and rigorously enforced.

Background

The Canadian Council of Ministers of the Environment (CCME) have been pushing to define the term compostable since 2005 (CCME, 2005). Several grades of compost material exist (CCME, 2005) and have been defined by the CCME, however there is still vast room for improvement as these have not been strictly adopted or enforced. As greenwashing takes hold of consumer advertising (Yoder, 2024), Canada needs to enforce a 20 year old suggestion to finally federally regulate the term “compostable” for public health as contaminants like microplastics increase in threat (Nihart et al., 2025).

Analysis

The following factors demonstrate some core issues of how the lack of regulation on the term compostable harms Canadians.

1. Stalling Regulation

- a. The CCME has been attempting to federally regulate the term “compostable” for decades and still creates plans regarding its usage (CCME, 2005). This delay in enacting legislation wastes money by repeatedly analyzing the same issue without any core change to the cause.
- b. The lack of regulation confuses people and increases their likelihood to not participate in composting at all (UNBC, 2024). Even when people do participate in composting, the lack of regulation leads to contamination of compostable material as social norms heavily influence people’s waste sorting intention (Liu & Yang, 2022; UNBC, 2024, p. 13).
- c. Compost material is easily contaminated (UNBC, 2024) and requires stricter compliance than other waste streams such as glass and metal recycling. Systems are less efficient when guidelines are disjointed which can be helped by federal planning (CCME, 2005). Compost material is not as regulated as plastic recycling (CCME, 2019), although plastic regulation has positive down-stream effects.
- d. Newer plans seek to address guidance once again (CCME, 2020; CCME 2025a) however no regulation has been federally legislated under such guidance.

2. Greenwashing by product producers

- a. Companies continuously invent new ways that mislead consumers into thinking their products are environmentally friendly (Yoder, 2024, pp. 33) or “compostable” despite regulation targeting that issue. Existing greenwashing regulation is not driving meaningful changes as its criteria remains unclear (Savage & Exner-Pirot, 2025, p. 4).
- b. Municipalities in Canada handle compost systems and vary widely in terms of what is accepted and what can be composted, without reliable data (EREF, 2021). The lack of regulation, such as for product labels, increases the contamination rates without producers being responsible (CCME, 2025b, p. 20).

3. Criteria for contamination

- a. New research is emerging that microscopic levels of plastic can accumulate in the body with toxic effects (Nihart et al., 2025) as Canada defines plastic as being a

toxic substance (Government of Canada, 2021). Heavy metals such as lead are regulated in compost material (CCME, 2005, p. 11) but plastic has not yet been as sufficiently analyzed and more research is needed.

- b. Contaminated compost material is used in most food systems regardless of diet (Cverenkárová et al., 2021). This has widespread implications for the health of Canadians that remain unaddressed.

Recommendations

The ministry should look to federally regulate and enforce the usage of the term "compostable" to reduce harmful down-stream effects of compost contamination. Other recommendations include:

- Federally regulate the term “compostable” in simple terms
 - Distinguish a term for ‘industrially compostable’ and ‘backyard compostable’ to distinguish the level to the consumer.
 - Harmonize the term across all of Canada by following the suggestions of the CCME Reference Compendium (CCME, 2025b).
- Penalize producers who greenwash products
 - Implement fines on a per unit basis of products that do not comply with the regulation standard under testing.
 - Lead a national education campaign on the importance of composting compared to recycling, funded in part by non-compliant producers.
- Reward producers who adopt the new standard of "compostable".
 - Provide incentives to regulated “compostable” environmentally friendly products.
 - Subsidize infrastructure that improves the efficiency and production rates of higher grade compost material.
- Study the long-term health risks of using lower grade compost
 - Increase research on if contaminants accumulate faster in the body when comparing grades of compost.
 - Expand the scope of contaminants included in the regulation and routinely update the regulation every 3 years.

References

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