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Raising the bar on biodegradables Slow-degrading service ware prompts new cutlery contract

Aug 24, 2009

By Monica Chapman

Building on its reputation as one of the nation's top-composting institutions, Ohio University is pursuing an alternate line of biodegradable cutlery that can keep pace with its composting technology.

According to Director of Facilities Management Steve Mack, the potato starch-based forks, knives and spoons currently offered at Baker University Center aren't breaking down fast enough to accommodate the university's 90-day composting cycle.

A new product produced by BioSelect will soon replace Ohio University's service ware, Mack said. But until the switch is made, service ware that hasn't yet broken down has to be manually filtered from each batch of compost and removed from the site, per the Environmental Protection Agency's permitting regulations for waste management.

"We're looking for service ware that will turn into soil at the same rate that our food waste degrades," said Sustainability Coordinator Sonia Marcus. "Some of these materials are simply not breaking down fast enough for our purposes."

Gauging a product's ability to compost isn't an exact science, Marcus said, adding that Ohio University is among the pioneers when it comes to working on a mass scale. As a pioneer, the university has the added responsibility of ensuring that the products perform as expected.

"That's part of why so much attention has been focused on our project," Marcus said. "We are providing the test case on whether or not these products are biodegrading within a reasonable period of time."

Biodegradable service ware is not new to Ohio University. The institution has been [purchasing biodegradable food packaging and cutlery since 2007](#), with the opening of the new Baker University Center.

Universities are not the only ones pining for biodegradables these days.

Consumer demand is on the rise nationwide according to a study by the Freedonia Group, which predicts demand for biodegradable plastic to expand nearly 16 percent annually through 2012 in the U.S.

What sets Ohio University apart, according to Mack, is that other consumers are not composting.

"A lot of people buy them because it's a better product to send to the landfill. We are probably one of the few sites in the country that are buying compostable service ware and actually composting it," he said.

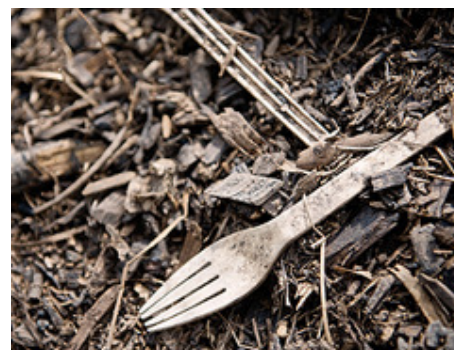
"(Manufacturers) are starting to come to us for feedback and input because in the future, they want to say Ohio University is using our stuff... not only buying it but composting it."

Ohio University [launched its composting initiative](#) last August with the



Before...

Photographer: Rick Fatica



... and after. All of the other biodegradable food service products shown in the first photo above break down into compost within 90 days, but the service ware has not finished its decomposition process.

Photographer: Kevin Riddell

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installation of a Wright Environmental in-vessel composting unit. Capable of processing up to 28 tons of compostable material at any given time, the unit is the largest in-vessel system of its kind on a U.S. college or university campus. The university expects to divert as much as 25 percent of the Athens campus' solid waste -- or 50 percent of the organic waste stream -- from the landfill as a result of this project.

Currently, the Central Food Facility, [Baker University Center](#), Nelson Dining Hall and Café Biblio are contributing to the university's compost. Baker University Center and Café Biblio are the only dining facilities where biodegradable service ware is in use.

According to Mack, a test batch of BioSelect service ware broke down in a much more reasonable amount of time, encouraging the university to move forward with a bid. Because BioSelect is so new, the products are not yet available for purchase, but Procurement and Supply Manager Melanie Glassmire said the university hopes to have a contract by September when students arrive.

In addition to the new service ware, Ohio University also intends to purchase biodegradable cup lids, sandwich wedge containers and trail mix containers for the coming school year, Glassmire said. The goal, according to Mack, is to eventually have 100 percent biodegradable products coming out of Baker University Center.

From a sustainability standpoint, Marcus said Ohio University's embrace of large-scale composting will benefit institutions nationwide.

"Colleges and universities across the United States are looking to us for critical and practical lessons that can be applied to waste management on their campuses," she said, adding, "The [compost project](#) has quite a lot of fans."

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