

Resource Recycling

North America's Recycling and Composting Journal

December 1999



Composting Supplement

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Sealing consumers' approval of compost

by Ron Alexander

The long-awaited national Seal of Testing Assurance Program should bring maturity to the compost market.

The last decade has seen tremendous growth in the use of compost for a number of applications. While this has given way to a growing industry and a large end market for compost, it also raises a question of quality when comparing one compost product to the next. Buyers want to know what is in the products they are using, and many want a national standard, rather than those dictated by many existing state and federal groups.

It is for these reasons that the U.S. Composting Council (Amherst, Ohio) is working, under a grant from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (Washington), to develop a national forum for assuring compost testing and information disclosure. Working for the past decade as an advocacy group and trade organization for the composting industry, the Council hopes to roll out its Seal of Testing Assurance Program in pilot form on January 1, 2000. It is a comprehensive program that USCC hopes to see grow and become the industry's symbol for a customer-oriented composting operation.

Raising the bar

The Council's program was developed to improve customer confidence in compost selection and utilization and to enhance compost's position as a mainstream horticultural, agricultural and retail product. For many years, USCC has attempted to address the issue of compost quality standards. These efforts resulted in USCC's development of

Suggested Compost Parameters and Compost Use Guidelines and the *Field Guide to Compost Use*. Developing national standards for compost has proved difficult because, to a large extent, any type of quantitative standard needs to be based on the specific end use of the compost. USCC will use the Seal of Testing Assurance Program to raise the "high bar" within the industry, moving composters toward uniform testing and disclosure of needed end-use information. The program promotes:

- Ongoing testing. Customers are assured that products are tested for quality on an ongoing basis.
- Disclosure of test data. Customers are provided usable test data upon request.
- Providing end-user instructions. Customers are given standardized educational information, via end-use instructions.

Key program elements

While the program still is under development and review (modifications are likely throughout the pilot), key elements of the program exist.

Testing frequency. To ensure ongoing testing, while being mindful of costs, testing frequency within the program is based upon the volume of compost that the producer manufactures annually. To obtain the seal, man-

ufacturers or marketers (called participants) will enroll in the program and regularly sample and test their products. Participants will complete analyses as prescribed in Table 1.

Content analysis. Compost producers will be required to test and/or provide numerical data for a variety of compost characteristics. These include factors such as pH, soluble salts, nutrient content (N, P₂O₅, K₂O, Ca, Mg), water-holding capacity, bulk density, moisture content, organic matter content, particle size (report only), growth screening or maturity and stability. Some of these parameters, such as pH and soluble salt content are necessary to assist end users in using the product properly under growing conditions. Other characteristics, such as moisture content and bulk density are necessary for end users because they affect handling and transportation costs. Finally, parameters such as trace element content and pathogens are necessary to assure that the products are safe for use. It is expected that pathogen and heavy metal (U.S. EPA 503 metals) analyses will be required to some degree for all composts participating in the program, regardless of feedstock.

In addition, any testing required by existing state or federal regulation (e.g., pathogens, heavy metals, pesticides, inerts) to assure public health, safety and environmental protec-

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tion must be completed and submitted to USCC's program manager at the frequency so regulated. The program specifies that testing be done by laboratories that use the test methods described in USCC's Test Methods for the Examination of Compost and Composting. A list of such labs will be provided to participants.

Publicly available results. Results of the test analyses will be made available to inquiring customers by the participants, using the Compost Technical Data Sheet or other written promotional documents developed by the participant. While test results must be report-

ed to the Council's program managers at the time of testing, the Council will not distribute data to compost customers or anyone else. In addition, producers will have to provide instructions for the safe and effective use of their compost product. All participants must offer a list of product ingredients and directions for product use (e.g., instructions on the bag, instructional sheet with bulk shipments or their compost technical data sheet) at the point of sale.

Facilities. Each of the participants' individual compost facilities requires separate enrollment in the program. Each facility must

Table 1 Testing frequencies

Compost volume, tons per year	Frequency
1-2,500	Once per year
2,500-6,250	Once per quarter
6,250-17,500	Once per 60 days
17,500 and above	Once per month

Source: U.S. Composting Council, 1999.

certify that it is in compliance with all applicable local, state and federal regulations, and it must remain compliant to remain in the program.

Fees and licensing. Participants will pay an annual fee to cover program management and promotional activities. The participant will have the right to use the Seal of Testing Assurance Logo (and other promotional activities) as long as they stay compliant with program rules.

What can be gained?

The program seeks to promote customer-oriented composters. It assists composters that are rigorously testing their product in providing proper end-use information to their customers so these composting firms can differentiate themselves from composters that are not. The program helps to improve customer satisfaction, because compost customers and specifiers (landscape architects, state departments of transportation, etc.) are able to make more informed purchasing decisions. Finally, field results are improved, since customers are provided with the product quality and application information they need to use compost properly, and for optimum results.

By providing such data, participating composters will have the ability differentiate themselves from their competition and illustrate their commitment to their customers, as well as receive a variety of other benefits.

Besides helping compost customers directly, the program reduces the chances that additional compost regulations will be developed by state and national organizations. And, the program helps improve the image of compost as a manufactured product produced under controlled conditions.

Program promotion

USCC will continuously promote the Seal of Testing Compliance Program logo to end users and specifiers, thereby improving the value of the program to compost producers and manufacturers. The goal is to bring the program to a level whereby the seal on product literature or bags is actually a major factor in product purchasing or specifying the use of the product. Promotional activities will

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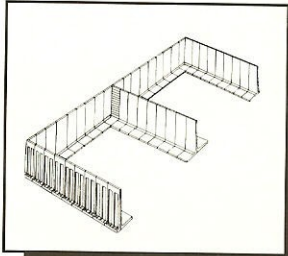
focus on potential end users, such as landscapers, growers and golf courses, and entities that specify compost use, such as landscape architects and designers. Paid advertisements will be used, along with articles in trade journals and newsletters, Web-page promotion and trade show attendance.

The participants, of course, will have the ability to use the Seal of Testing Compliance logo within their own promotional activities, enabling them to associate their program with the U.S. Composting Council.

For over 10 years, USCC has advocated the use of composting as an effective waste management strategy as well as a mainstream manufacturing process that produces a high-quality horticultural, agricultural and retail product. USCC membership includes composters, compost marketers, consultants, educators, etc. Through the years, USCC has developed many publications and training workshops on composting technologies, operations, end use and environmental aspects.

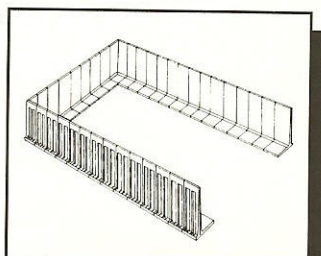
Opportunities to become involved with the pilot program still exist. For additional information on the Seal of Testing Assurance Program or joining the Council, contact the U.S. Composting Council at (440) 989-2748 or at www.compostingcouncil.org (Web). **RR**

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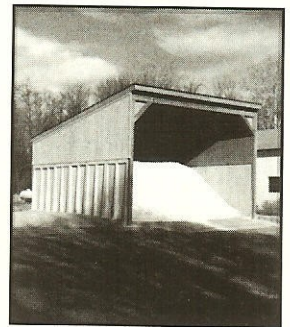
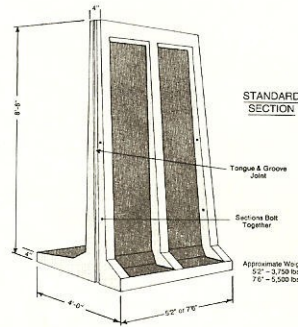


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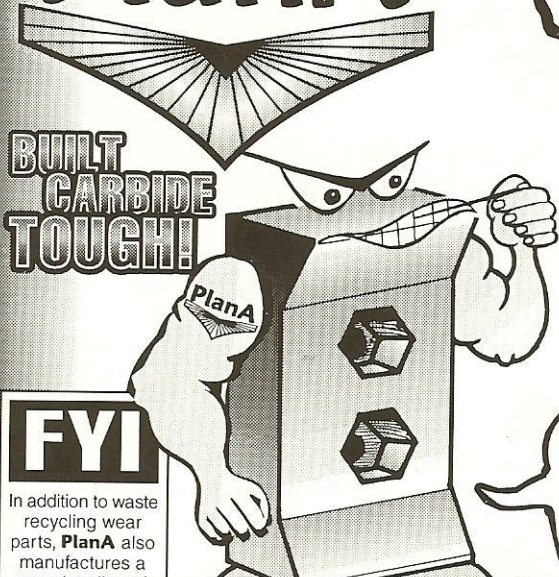
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