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# ELEMENTS

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# How the Seal of Testing Assurance Program Is Influencing Market Development

By Ron Alexander

In order to address industry requirements, the US Composting Council developed the Seal of Testing Assurance Program.

For compost to gain a reputation as a mainstream lawn/garden and agricultural product, the composting industry must raise its professionalism and work to both produce consistently high-quality products and assist end users with purchasing the products they require. In order to address these industry requirements, the United States Composting Council (USCC) developed the Seal of Testing Assurance (STA) Program. With financial assistance provided by the Environmental Protection Agency, USCC kicked off the STA Program in 2000. The program is seen by many as the first step toward establishing national compost standards. In its current form, however, the STA Program is a compost-testing and information-disclosure program that uses uniform testing and sampling protocols. The STA Program uses test methods and sampling procedures outlined in USCC's *Test Methods for the Evaluation of Composting and Compost*.

The goal of USCC's STA Program is to allow compost buyers to purchase more easily the products they desire or require for a particular project. Another goal is to allow buyers and specifiers to compare compost products more systematically, allowing for an educated purchasing decision. This can be achieved if participating composters use a uniform product label, containing test-analysis data, end-user instructions, and an ingredient statement. Educated purchasing decisions will help ensure successful utilization of compost in the field. What is even more important to the composting industry itself, however, is that the overall program is encouraging needed consistency within the composting industry—consistency in product sampling, lab-testing methodologies, and product labeling. Only through this type of industrywide consistency will the "green" industry become dependent on the composting industry as a respected and ongoing supplier of materials. Therefore the success of the STA Program goes far beyond the success of any individual composter: It works toward the goal of bringing necessary consistency to the composting industry.

## Current Status

The STA Program has continued to grow in participation since its inception, with very little attrition of participants from year to year. Almost 100 compost products, representing more than 60 companies and 3 million yd.<sup>3</sup> of compost, now are certified through the program. The prowess of the program also has improved with end users and specifiers across the country. Indeed efforts to promote the program to landscape architects and government entities have led to STA Program-certified composts being specified by name in more and more landscape and construction projects. Although significant efforts have

been made on an ongoing basis to educate end users and specifiers about the benefits of using STA Program-certified composts, the composters receiving the greatest benefits from the program are still those actively promoting it during their ongoing sales and marketing efforts. The USCC STA Program logo can be seen on many bags of compost, products containing compost, pieces of product literature, and promotional advertisements.

Other new developments have occurred that affect the growth and reputation of the program.

## Texas

One state that has embraced the STA Program is Texas. Thanks to the efforts of Scott McCoy of the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality and Barrie Cogburn of the Texas Department of Transportation (TXDOT), TXDOT has become the largest public user of compost in the nation. Many articles have been written to illustrate the success TXDOT has had with compost used as both a soil amendment and an erosion control material. With all of its success in using compost, TXDOT knew that receiving and using poor-quality compost could tarnish the success of its program. Having already established its compost specifications, TXDOT saw the STA Program as a way to implement them. Since the program requires uniform, ongoing testing of compost products and uniform product labeling, it was seen as a means for TXDOT project engineers to evaluate the potential compost products for their projects, as well as for TXDOT field inspectors to know what products were delivered to their project sites. Since TXDOT started requiring the use of only STA Program-certified products, 16 Texas composters and 30 products—all soil amendment and erosion control composts—have been certified.

An exciting development to the Texas story is that many companies marketing outside of the TXDOT market are seeing STA Program certification as a prerequisite for doing business. At the recent Texas Nursery & Landscape Association conference, 5 of the 15 actual compost producers at the conference were STA Program participants, and they proudly displayed the STA Program logo in their booth displays, literature, and product bags. Several others are evaluating enrollment.

## AASHTO

The STA Program also will benefit from the approval of the new American Association of State Highway and Transportation Officials (AASHTO) erosion control specifications for compost. Specifications have been developed for the use of compost in blanket and berm

**Table 1.** Test Methods for Compost Characterization

Compost Parameters	Reported As	Test Method	Test Method Name
pH		TMECC 04.11-A	Electrometric pH Determinations for Compost; 1:5 Slurry Method
Soluble Salts	dS/m (mmhos/cm)	TMECC 04.10-A	Electrical Conductivity for Compost; 1:5 Slurry Method (Mass Basis)
Primary Plant Nutrients:	% , as-is (wet) and dry weight basis		
Nitrogen	Total N	TMECC 04.02-D	Nitrogen; Total Nitrogen by Combustion
Phosphorus	P <sub>2</sub> O <sub>5</sub>	TMECC 04.03-A	Phosphorus; Total Phosphorus
Potassium	K <sub>2</sub> O	TMECC 04.04-A	Potassium; Total Potassium
Calcium	Ca	TMECC 04.04-Ca	Secondary and Micronutrient Content; Calcium
Magnesium	Mg	TMECC 04.04-Mg	Secondary and Micronutrient Content; Magnesium
Moisture Content	%, wet weight basis	TMECC 03.09-A	Total Solids and Moisture at 70±5°C
Organic Matter Content	%, dry weight basis	TMECC 05.07-A	Matter Method; Loss-On-Ignition Organic Matter Method
Particle Size	Screen size passing through	TMECC 02.12-B	Laboratory Sample Preparation; Sample Sieving for Aggregate Size Classification
Stability (Respirometry)	mg CO <sub>2</sub> -C per g TS per day mg CO <sub>2</sub> -C per g OM per day	TMECC 05.08-B	Respirometry, Carbon Dioxide Evolution Rate
Maturity (Bioassay) Percent Emergence Relative Seedling Vigor	% (average) % (average)	TMECC 05.05-A	Biological Assays; Seedling Emergence and Relative Growth

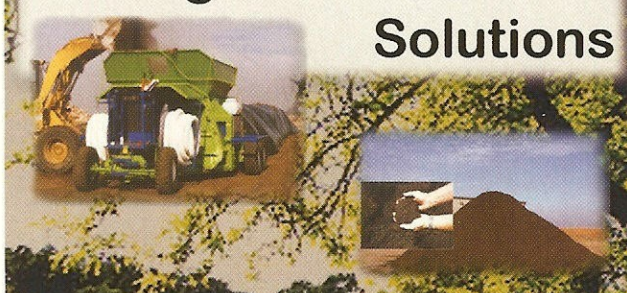
applications, and the approved specifications now have been published in the 2003 AASHTO Provisional Standards manual. To illustrate that a compost has met the erosion control product specifications, the same slate of tests required by the STA Program (and the same test methods) must be analyzed (the testing slate can be found in Table 1). Since similar testing will be required, there will be little additional expense to join the STA Program for those composters producing an erosion control compost. Since the use of compost in erosion control is still a new application, it also will benefit from the credibility of the STA Program.

As these examples illustrate, the STA Program has started to make the national impact that USCC hoped it would many years ago while still in its formative stages within the Market Development Committee. Working with USCC, the composting industry must continue to build on the credibility of the STA Program, expanding composter involvement in the program and end-user/specifier knowledge about it.

For additional information regarding the STA Program, contact the program managers (Ron Alexander, 919/367-8350, or Al Rattie, 215/258-5259) or log on to the USCC Web site at [www.compostingcouncil.org](http://www.compostingcouncil.org). For additional information on the AASHTO erosion control specifications, contact Ron Alexander or visit [www.alexassoc.net](http://www.alexassoc.net).

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