



Evergreen State College Student Newspaper



Composting Solutions with Cedar Creek

By Joe Anderson

For the last ten months, The Evergreen State College has been in a struggle to manage the school's food waste in a sustainable manner. The school is now investigating other community connections to handle this waste.

Silver Springs, the commercial composting facility that previously received Evergreen's compost, changed their acceptance policy in November 2012, stating that they no longer take "plastics of any kind", which included the biodegradable utensils Aramark uses in the Greenery. According to Scott Morgan, chair of Evergreen's Sustainability Council, "about every year something in their policy changed, and this change had been particularly challenging because Silver Springs didn't communicate with us directly."

Joseph Crumbley, a recent Evergreen graduate, spent the summer working as an intern for Aramark. The

focus of his internship was to work towards a zero-waste food services department at Evergreen. A major component of this was finding a plan for the school's food waste that was both affordable and stayed true to the Evergreen vision for a truly sustainable future.

After comparing many different options (including setting up an on-site, student run composting facility), Crumbley began working with the Sustainability in Prisons Project, another venture that started at Evergreen. According to their website, it is "a partnership founded by the Washington State Department of Corrections and The Evergreen State College. Our mission is to bring science and nature into prisons."

Part of this project was installing an industrial composting system at Cedar Creek Correctional Center. According to Crumbley, "It's not set up to be a commercial composting facility. It's more

to deal with their waste and do job training for some of the prisoners." Cedar Creek only has about 400 beds, so even with both food waste and biosolids (collected human

than if the utensils break down or not. Morgan estimates that the cost of composting with Cedar Creek will only be slightly more expensive than

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waste for composting), "they can't fill [their composting unit]. So they are looking to build partnerships using the system they have, instead of everyone building their own."

On September 25 Evergreen performed a trial run with the Cedar Creek, bringing all food waste from the Greenery to the facility. Since Cedar Creek is not currently selling their finished compost, there is no worry about the "compostable" utensils being mixed in. According to Crumbley, "It's more to see if there are any hiccups in the system, rather

with Silver Springs, due to the similarities in distance both facilities have to the college.

Because the compostable utensils are at the center of the controversy, Crumbley also sent a batch of alternative utensils to test if they would break down better in Cedar Creek's facility. According to Crumbley, the industry definition of compostable includes "anything that shows some breakdown in 40-100 days." The current utensils are made from only 70% renewable resources, and they still contain some petroleum products, and did not begin to

break down in the necessary amount of time. The new utensils Crumbley is testing are 100% renewable resources, mostly corn.

"It's a flaw in the definition, really," says Crumbley. "With some of these things that are considered compostable, you could throw them on the side of the road and nothing will happen for years... they are testing the chemicals, not the product." Many of these utensils that do not break down in normal composting situations become a problem for commercial composters like Silver Springs, because they are trying to sell the finished compost as a consumer product, and pieces of plastic in the food waste is not acceptable. At Cedar Creek, most of the compost is used for on-site wildlife restoration or agricultural projects, like their small farms, which grow vegetables for their kitchen.

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Inmate at Washington Correction Center in Shelton inspects a "rotating-drum composter" similar to those in Cedar Creeks. Photo courtesy of Benj Drummond and Sara Joy Steele.