

**NATURAL RESOURCES CONSERVATION SERVICE  
MONTANA CONSERVATION PRACTICE STANDARD**

**COMPOSTING FACILITY (NUMBER)**

**CODE 317**

**DEFINITION**

A structure or device to contain and facilitate the controlled aerobic decomposition of manure or other organic material by micro-organisms into a biologically stable organic material that is suitable for use as a soil amendment.

**PURPOSE**

To reduce the pollution potential and improve the handling characteristics of organic waste solids; and produce a soil amendment that adds organic matter and beneficial organisms, provides slow-release plant-available nutrients, and improves soil condition.

**CONDITIONS WHERE PRACTICE APPLIES**

This practice applies where:

- Organic waste material is generated by agricultural production or processing.
- The facility is a component of a planned waste management system;
- The facility can be constructed, operated and maintained without polluting air and/or water resources; and,
- The compost can be applied to the land or marketed to the public.

**CRITERIA**

**General Criteria Applicable to All Purposes**

**Laws and Regulations.** Install and operate the facility in compliance with all federal, state, tribal and local laws, rules and regulations.

**Safety.** Incorporate safety and personal protection features and practices into the facility and its operation as appropriate to minimize the

occurrence of equipment and biosecurity hazards during the composting process.

**When composting structures can capture and contain biogas, warning signs as noted below shall be posted:**

- “Warning Flammable Gas”
- “No Smoking”

**Facility Siting.** Locate on a base of low permeability soils, concrete, or other liner material that will not allow contamination of groundwater. **Base materials comprised of soil shall meet seepage criteria noted in Conservation Practice Standard, Waste Storage Facility (Code 313).** The floor of the composting facility shall be at least **four** feet above the seasonal high water table.

Geologic investigations shall be made for compost facility sites according to criteria stated in conservation practice standard, Waste Storage Facility (Code 313).

Locate outside of floodplains when practical; otherwise protect the facility from inundation and damage from a 25-year flood event. **Facilities located within the 100-year floodplain require coordination with the local floodplain coordinator as per floodplain permit requirements. Facilities within the 100-year floodplain also require concurrence from the State Conservation Engineer.**

**Composting facilities shall not be located within 500 feet of existing water wells.**

Locate so that prevailing winds and landscape elements minimize odors and protect visual resources.

Direct surface runoff away from the compost facility. Direct contaminated runoff from the composting operation to an appropriate storage or

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**Conservation practice standards are reviewed periodically and updated if needed. To obtain the current version of this standard contact the Natural Resources Conservation Service.**

**NOTE:** This type of font (AaBbCcDdEe 123..) indicates NRCS National Standards.  
This type of font (AaBbCcDdEe 123..) indicates Montana Supplement.

treatment facility, **such as a VTA**, for further management.

Locate so that water is available to the facility during dry periods to ensure proper moisture and acceptable curing times to meet the management goals. **Appropriate moisture levels (>35%) are critical to successful composting processes (Dafoe, 2011). Utilize conservation practice standard, Irrigation Pipeline (Code 430), to provide water at the composting site if supplemental water is not available.**

**Facility Type.** Select the type of composting facility or method based on the type and availability of raw material, the desired quality of finished compost, equipment, labor, time and land available.

Meet the structural requirements of conservation practice standard, Waste Storage Facility (Code 313) when designing slabs, walls, and support structures. Meet the requirements of conservation practice standard, Roofs and Covers (Code 367) when designing roofs. **The application of roofs and covers for practices other than Animal Mortality Facility (Code 316) shall be approved by the State Conservation Engineer.**

**Facility Size.** Size the composting facilities to accommodate the amount of raw material planned for active composting, with a capacity consistent with the composting processes that will be used to produce the desired compost product, and with sufficient finishing time as required to achieve the desired characteristics. Space for compost storage may be included in the finishing space or in a separate facility. Select dimensions to accommodate handling and processing.

A facility for manure and other agricultural organic waste that is to be used on the farm shall have the capacity to produce compost that can be safely stored without undesirable odors. This requires the temperature of the compost to be maintained above 104° F for five days with at least four hours above 130° F during that time period.

A facility to produce compost for use off the farm or for sale shall have the capacity to significantly reduce pathogens. For a static pile or within vessel facility this requires the temperature of the compost to be maintained above 130° F for three days. The total compost period shall include time for the initial primary stage of composting and time for secondary stage composting. For a windrow system this requires the temperature of the

compost to be above 130° F for 15 days with a minimum of five turnings of the compost.

**Adequate (>5%) oxygen levels are required for successful aerobic composting processes. Low (< 120° F) compost temperatures, significant drops in temperature, excessively high (>150° F) temperatures and putrid odors are all indicators that aeration is needed. Limiting windrow heights to approximately 3 feet and incorporating frequent turning are appropriate best management practices for maintaining oxygen in windrow style composting. Passively aerated windrows require multiple, 4-inch diameter perforated pipes placed through the base of the pile along with amendments selected for their structure and porosity. Larger windrows (5-8 feet) can be implemented when accompanied with a pipe network and blower fans in addition to amendments that provide structure and porosity.**

If the facility is to be used to compost animal carcasses, refer to conservation practice standard **Animal Mortality Facility (Code 316)**. These types of composting facilities shall have the capacity to maintain the compost temperature greater than 130° F for at least 5 days as an average throughout the compost mass followed by a compatible time for secondary composting. For a windrow system the temperature of the compost shall be above 130° F for 15 days with a minimum of five turnings of the compost. **Bin mortality composting is static. Composting materials are not turned and anaerobic composting is occurring.**

Size animal mortality composting facilities according to the methods provided in the National Engineering Handbook Part 637, Chapter 2 – Composting (NEH 637.0213, Dead Animal Composting), National Engineering Handbook Part 651, Agricultural Waste Management Field Handbook, Chapter 10 Mortality Management (NEH 651.1007), NRCS or comparable extension publication. Base the size of dead animal composting facilities on normal mortality loss records for the operation. If these data are not available use locally established mortality rates for the type of operation. Ensure that the final product of the composting process has no visible pieces of soft tissue remaining.

**Use of Finished Compost.** Land application of finished compost shall be in accordance with conservation practice standard, Nutrient Management (Code 590) or conservation practice standard Waste Utilization (Code 633).

**Composted material intended for sale or use off-farm should be tested by a certified laboratory for quality. Appendix A of the Montana NRCS “Operation and Maintenance Guide for Your Composting Facility” provides a listing of analytical laboratories approved under United States Composting Council’s “Seal of Testing Assurance” program. A consistent, high quality product is essential when marketing compost for sale or off-farm use.**

## CONSIDERATIONS

To reduce offensive odors increase the carbon nitrogen ratio. A carbon nitrogen ration of 30:1 in the initial mix should have minimal odors.

Minimize odors and nitrogen loss by selecting carbonaceous material that, when blended with the nitrogenous material, provides a balance of nutrients and porous texture for aeration.

A chemical neutralizing or other additive agent should be used if structural components do not provide adequate odor reduction.

Maximize solar warming by aligning piles north to south configured with moderate side slopes.

Orient windrows to prevent ponding of surface runoff.

Protect compost facilities from the wind in cold or dry climates. Wind protection may help prevent excess drying of the compost.

Protect compost facilities from the sun in dry climates by providing a roof over the open air facilities.

Minimize blown in rain by providing roof overhang.

For facilities that are organic producers or that sell compost to organic producers, ensure that the treated lumber used in the stacking facility meets the requirements for organic production. It may be best to have the producer consult with the organic certifier as to the use and acceptability of treated lumber for litter and compost storage.

## PLANS AND SPECIFICATIONS

Prepare plans and specifications in accordance with the criteria of this standard and describe the requirements for applying the practice to achieve its intended use, including:

- Layout and location of livestock facilities, waste collection points, and/or waste transfer
- Size, type and number of animals or other sources of organic feedstock
- Grading plan showing excavation, fill, and drainage, as appropriate
- **Structural details indicating materials and dimensions**
- Size and capacity needed
- Design requirements
- **Construction Specifications and Special Provisions**
- Safety requirement for operation

## OPERATION AND MAINTENANCE

Develop an operation and maintenance plan that is consistent with the purposes of this practice and the life of the composting facility. Recipe ingredients and the sequence that they are to be layered and mixed shall be given in the plan. A **Montana NRCS “Operation and Maintenance Guide for Your Composting Facility” is available on the Montana NRCS web page under Technical Resources > Engineering > Engineering Documents > NEH650, Montana Supplement to the Engineering Field Handbook > Chapter 52, Operation and Maintenance.**

**Compost Mix.** Develop a compost mix that encourages aerobic microbial decomposition and avoids nuisance odors. **An Excel spreadsheet titled “Manure Compost Recipe\_Computation Sheet” is available on the Montana NRCS web page under Technical Resources > Engineering > Engineering Software and Spreadsheets.**

**Carbon-Nitrogen Ratio.** The initial compost mix shall result in a carbon to nitrogen (C:N) ratio between 25:1 and 40:1. Compost with a lesser carbon to nitrogen ratio can be used if nitrogen mobilization is not a concern.

**Carbon Source.** Store a dependable source of carbonaceous material with a high C:N ratio to mix with nitrogen rich waste materials.

**Bulking Materials.** Add bulking materials to the mix as necessary to enhance aeration. The bulking material may be the carbonaceous material used in the mix or a non-biodegradable material that is salvaged at the end of the compost period. Make provision for the salvage of any non-

biodegradable material used in the composting process.

**Moisture Level.** Maintain adequate moisture in the compost mix throughout the compost period within the range of 40 to 65 percent (wet basis). Prevent excess moisture from accumulating in the compost in high precipitation climatic regions. This may require the facility to be covered.

**Temperature of Compost Mix.** Manage the compost to attain and then maintain the internal temperature for the duration required to meet management goals. It may be necessary for the compost to reach 145° F to adequately destroy weed seeds. Closely monitor temperatures above 155° F. Take action immediately to cool piles that have reached temperatures above 185° F.

**Turning/Aeration.** The frequency of turning/aeration shall be appropriate for the composting method used, and to attain the desired amount of moisture removal and temperature control while maintaining aerobic degradation.

**Monitoring:** The operation and maintenance plan shall state that composting is a biological process that needs monitoring and management throughout the composting period to insure proper composting processes. The operation may need to undergo some trial and error in the start-up of a new composting facility. Manage the compost piles for temperature, odors, moisture, and

oxygen, as appropriate. Test the finished compost as appropriate to assure that the required decomposition has been reached. **Guidance for compost monitoring and testing is provided in Appendix C of the Montana NRCS “Operation and Maintenance Guide for Your Composting Facility.”**

## REFERENCES

USDA, NRCS. 2000. National Engineering Handbook, Part 637, Chapter 2, Composting. Washington, D.C.

**Northeast Regional Agricultural Engineering Service (NRAES) 54. 1992. On-Farm Composting Handbook, Cooperative Extension, Ithaca, NY.**

**Dafoe, J.M., T.M. Bass, J. Schumacher, and D.L. Boss. 2011. The Viability and Economics of Composting On-Farm Feedstuffs and Animal Waste in Northern Montana, Proceedings, Western Section, American Society of Animal Science, Vol. 62, 2011.**

**Dafoe, J.M., T.M. Bass, and D.L. Boss, 2011. Determining the Viability of Beef Cattle Mortality Composting in Northern Montana, Proceedings, Western Section, American Society of Animal Science, Vol. 62, 2011.**

**NEH 650, Supplement to the Engineering Field Handbook, Chapter 52, Operation and Maintenance.**