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Fog Fest: Spirit of community and a little bit of debate

By [Pacifica Tribune](#)

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Amidst the food, music, art, shopping and spirit of community that prevailed during the 2011 Fog Fest, conversation — and a little bit of debate -- popped up along Palmetto Avenue. Many Pacificans and people from neighboring communities where composting and recycling programs have been initiated, deftly separated their discards in preparation for disposal into the Green (compost), Blue (recycle) and Gray (plain old trash slated for the landfill) bins. Those not familiar with this practice benefitted from coaching provided by the Fog Fest Green Team (volunteers from the Pacifica Beach Coalition, Oceana High School Europe Interim and Sojourn programs, and Master Composters) stationed at each intersection and the signage created by the Fog Fest Organizing Group (FFOG). As a result, for the second year, approximately 70 percent of the waste from the Fog Fest was diverted from the landfill.

For several years, the FFOG has aimed at being an increasingly "green" event. The "Resource Recovery Centers" staffed by the Green Team were initiated to focus on diverting waste from the landfill and minimizing the impact of single use plastics. Separating organics (corn cobs, bones, uneaten food, food soiled paper, even oyster shells!) was a natural step when Recology of the Coast added composting as part of the service provided to Pacifica residents. Additionally, the use of biodegradable cups and silverware has become the standard for all beverage and food booths.

A few definitions for reference:

"RECYCLABLE" products can be collected and reprocessed to produce new items. Common recyclable materials are: paper, cardboard, plastic, glass, aluminum, and electronic waste. Recycling diverts waste from landfills.

BIODEGRADABLE" simply means that a product will break down into carbon dioxide, water and biomass within a reasonable amount of time in the natural environment. Biodegradability is a desirable feature in products such as cleaning agents. Conventional cleaning agents will often release harmful phosphates and volatile organic compounds (VOCs) as they break down, but biodegradable versions will not. Products that are labeled as 'biodegradable' can be disposed of in the trash bin. Landfills, however, lack the microorganisms and oxygen required for waste to biodegrade in a timely manner, so what is placed in the trash should be minimized.

COMPOSTABLE" products are biodegradable, with an added benefit: when they break down, they release valuable nutrients into the soil, aiding the growth of trees and plants.

So why the debate? Innovation in the lifecycle of product design isn't without hiccups. To be labeled and handled as "compostable" a product must break down in a specified number of days. A variety of factors apply to compostability, including the base material used, thickness of the material, and composting conditions such as how materials are prepared for composting; temperature of the compost pile; and, how frequently turned.

While most plastics are petroleum based, the new "compostable plastics" and/or "bioplastics" are made from renewable resources such as corn, sugar cane, soy and potato. Developed with the intention to be returned to the earth as nutrient rich compost versus going to the landfill or being recycled, waste disposal companies and composting facilities are still learning how to implement procedures to achieve the desired outcome from their operations.

Currently the facility where the waste from Fog Fest is taken is not able to effectively handle composting of all these new materials The biodegradable cups and silverware at Fog Fest therefore

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were not disposed of in the compost bins creating concern for a number of Fog Fest attendees and hence the debate.

What are the next steps in the continuing journey of "greening" the Fog Fest and increasing the diversion rate? The following are possibilities: 1) Engage in conversation to advocate for stepped up implementation of processes to convert the new plastic products into compost and / or develop a plan to haul resources recovered from the Fog Fest to a facility that is able to compost all the cups and utensils used at the event. 2) Review of all food service products with a goal of moving to additional easily compostable goods (changing sauce cups from plastic to paper; wax paper versus foil) and eliminating unnecessary items (straws, cup lids). 3) Educational materials provided to vendors and suppliers regarding recyclability and composting encouraging minimal waste.

Thanks to the Fog Fest Organizing Group for another wonderful year and continuing the ongoing progress towards sustainability.

--Cindy Abbott

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