



STATE OF WASHINGTON

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

P.O. Box 42560 • Olympia, Washington 98504-2560 • (360) 902-1800

DATE: September 3, 2020

SUBJECT: Interpretive Statement DO-20-0001 –Compost Value as a Soil Health Amendment in Agriculture

On September 3, 2020, an interpretive statement regarding the Washington State Department of Agriculture (WSDA) analysis of commercial compost and its value in agricultural production was signed. Urban areas in Washington State currently supply residential and commercial yard and food waste for the production of commercial compost. That compost has been analyzed for soil health properties and that information is included in this statement.

A copy of the statement may be obtained by accessing our website or by contacting:

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OFFICE OF THE CODE REVISER
STATE OF WASHINGTON
FILED

DATE: September 08, 2020
TIME: 9:41 AM

WSR 20-19-026



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INTERPRETIVE STATEMENT

Number: DO-20-0001

Subject: Compost Use as a Farm Product and Soil Health Amendment in Agriculture Activities

Supersedes: Not Applicable

Contact: Kelly McLain, Policy Advisor to the Director
Email: kmclain@agr.wa.gov Phone: (360) 902-1945

Approved By:

Derek I. Sandison, Director

Date Approved: September 3, 2020

The Washington State Department of Agriculture (WSDA) issues this interpretive statement pursuant to RCW 34.05.230.

The WSDA provides this statement to acknowledge the potential benefits compost provides to soil health in commercial agricultural settings and its value as a farm product. The legislature has found that agricultural activities must be able to adopt new technologies and diversify into new crops and products if the agricultural industry is to survive and agricultural lands are to be conserved.

Background: Healthy soils are the underpinning of high agricultural production. Washington State produces over 300 crops annually, with a commercial crop gate value in excess of \$10 billion. Soil health can be influenced by many conditions, including nutrient amendment through compost application.

Washington State has a robust commercial compost industry, converting urban and rural residential and industrial food waste into compost for use in gardens as well as commercial agriculture. In June 2018, WSDA completed an analysis of provided commercial compost that allows the agency to make certain statements about the product and possible regulatory requirements.

Mature (aged) commercial compost was analyzed for metals content, organic content, and regulatory uncertainties were assessed.

Findings: WSDA finds that mature or aged commercial compost contains sufficient organic content to be considered as a possible soil amendment. Organic matter content for composts should be between 50 and 60 percent in order to meet soil health needs. Additional analysis

indicates that traditional composts will contain beneficial microorganisms and organic acids that may aid in improving soil health. Due to the Carbon: Nitrogen ratio found in most composts, it provides a slow release of nitrogen over time, which may indicate additional nitrogen is needed immediately after compost incorporation. This is not a negative aspect of compost but rather an outcome of its composition. It does not diminish the potential soil health improvements found through compost use.

Commercial composts also have the possibility of higher than average Iron and Aluminum concentrations, possibly originating from cross-contamination with non-organic waste. It is unknown how these levels may impact compost performance or interact with other nutrients found in the soil. Composters should consider conducting organic content and heavy metals analysis prior to resale. This is especially important for commercial agricultural purchasers.

Composting is a long-established agricultural activity that is gaining renewed importance for soil health and conservation of agricultural lands. Compost is an increasingly valuable farm product. This activity of composting is an agricultural activity and compost is a farm product under RCW 7.48.310, which defines agricultural activities and farm products for the purpose of RCW 7.48.305. Therefore, compost producers are afforded the additional protections under that statute subject to the limitations contained therein.