

Campus Waste Audit: What are we throwing away?

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On May 22, a group of students from *Ecological Agriculture*, Students of Evergreen for Ecological Design, and Developing Ecological Agricultural Practices emptied out campus garbage bins to sort the “waste.” The goal was to separate and quantify the amount of recyclable and compostable material in the campus waste stream.

After sorting garbage cans from Red Square, the Greenery, Seminar II, and the Sem II Café, we found only 12.5% “garbage” by weight, with 12.5% recyclables, and 75% compostable waste.

The compostable waste was further divided into two categories: food waste (30%) and other compostables (45%) such as coffee cups, paper plates, soiled napkins, and biodegradable utensils.

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CAMPUS GOALS FOR
ZERO WASTE BY 2020

One of the most difficult things was deciding what could be recycled and/or composted. For instance, tin foil is recyclable unless it has food residue on it. Milk cartons do not have a recycling symbol, yet they are recyclable as well.

The garbage pile contained plastic wrappers, chip bags, lids to plastic bottles, ketchup packets, and straws.

Currently, a portion of the compostable waste is diverted from the landfill and



STUDENTS DIG THROUGH THE GARBAGE TO EXAMINE THE WASTE. MORE THAN THREE QUARTERS OF THE TRASH COULD HAVE BEEN COMPOSTED

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utilized. The Evergreen Organic Farm processes one-third of the food waste. The campus facility contains three thermophilic reactors and a dysfunctional vermicomposting (worm) system.

The farm’s processing capacity is limited by infrastructure and storage space. The remaining food scraps go to a local pig farm.

Composting and reuse is a very important way to turn “waste” products into valuable resources. Compost is used to restore nutrients to the soil and improve soil quality.

Under our current agricultural system, much of the fertility needed to grow crops comes from industrial fertilizer that is manufactured with fossil fuels. Even most organic farms can trace their fertility to these unsustainable sources. Organic growers often rely on animal manures for their fertility needs, and most animals are fed corn and soy products originating in conventional fields in the Midwest. If we desire to move towards a more sustainable system, we need to find other ways to return nutrients to the farm.

Evergreen is touted as being at the forefront of sustainability education, yet the campus garbage consisted of 75% biodegradable substances that, with proper sorting and processing, could be returned

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Evergreen’s vision for a sustainable future is stated in the Sustainability Task Force’s mission:

“The Evergreen State College will be a laboratory for sustainability as demonstrated in its operations, curriculum, and quality of life for employees and students. We will nurture values and practical skills that motivate a lifetime of commitment to a sustainable, intergenerationally just way of living on a healthy planet.”

Beginning next year, the campus will be sending compostable waste to Silver Springs, a local compost facility that can process our entire current stream of biodegradables. However, this should be a temporary solution while planning a larger, more comprehensive system on campus that would be visible and educational, reduce our carbon footprint, save money, and help to achieve

campus goals for Zero Waste by 2020.

It would be helpful if students were given a brief lesson on the value and practice of conserving, recycling, and composting during orientation week. The school also needs to provide containers to sort compostables and food scraps. There also needs to be more education and signage relating to “waste” disposal.

Students need to take responsibility for their part in producing waste. Simple things like coffee cups really add up; we found hundreds. If you are going to be purchasing beverages on campus, bring your own mug! Reducing resource use is more important than composting waste.

If you are interested in carrying on the audit for the next school year, contact marben28@evergreen.edu.

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