



County of San Diego, Planning & Development Services

FAQS RELATED TO ORGANIC MATERIALS PROCESSING ZONING DIVISION

The Board of Supervisors approved an amendment to the Zoning Ordinance on September 14, 2022, to establish a new zoning section for Organic Material Processing No. 6977 and to update the existing Section 6902 and various reference amendments to the zoning ordinance and code of regulatory ordinances. These changes are intended to encourage the expansion of organic composting activities throughout the unincorporated County in a variety of land use settings.

Zoning Ordinance: <https://www.sandiegocounty.gov/content/sdc/pds/zoning.html>

Q 1. What is organic material processing?

Organic material processing refers to composting operations that include but are not limited to static piles, windrow, in-vessel, vermicomposting, and mushroom farming. All other organic processes are subject to additional discretionary review. New methods of Organic Materials Processing not currently considered by CalRecycle may be permitted subject to additional discretionary review as determined by the Director of Planning & Development Services or his or her designee and as guided by the new Ordinance No. 6977. Not all materials are compostable or can be reused or broken down, the following are some of the acceptable materials for composting.

Q 2. What kind of organic materials can be processed?

Organic Materials are defined as:

1. **Green Materials:** “Green Material” means any plant material except food material and vegetative food material. Green material includes, but is not limited to, tree and yard trimmings, untreated wood wastes, natural fiber products, wood waste from silviculture and manufacturing, and construction and demolition wood waste.
2. **Agricultural Materials:** “Agricultural Material” means waste material of plant or animal origin, which results directly from the conduct of agriculture, animal husbandry, horticulture, aquaculture, silviculture, vermiculture, viticulture and similar activities undertaken to produce food or fiber for human or animal consumption. Agricultural material includes, but is not limited to, manures, orchard and vineyard pruning, grape pomace, and crop residues.
3. **Vegetative Food Materials:** “Vegetative Food Material” means food material that is a plant based. Vegetative food material may be processed or cooked but must otherwise retain its essential natural character and no salts, preservatives, fats or oils, or adulterants have been added. Vegetative food material includes, but is not limited to, fruits and vegetables, edible flowers, and plants, outdated and spoiled produce, and coffee grounds.
4. **Food Materials:** “Food Material” means a waste material of plant or animal origin that results from the preparation or processing of food for animal or human consumption. Food material includes, but is not limited to, food waste from food facilities as defined in San Diego County Health and Safety Code, food processing establishments, grocery stores, institutional cafeterias (such as prisons, schools, and hospitals), and residential food scrap collection.

Q 3. What are the typical organic material processing practices?

Practices fall into the following categories:

1. **Static Piles** – Compostable materials are piled up, paying special attention to the mix of carbon materials, like leaves or wood chips, and nitrogen materials, like food waste or fresh grass. The pile is then turned regularly and kept moist. This method can take up to six months or a year to create compost.

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2. Aerated Static Piles – Piles are made the same way as static piles, except these have a system to let more air in. The system can be as simple as a pallet under the bin or as elaborate as PVC tubing with forced air inserted into the pile. More air helps the system work faster.
3. Windrow – Compostable materials are mixed and placed in long, narrow piles at least 4-ft high and can range up to 100 feet long. This method is usually done in rural areas as it requires a lot of space and heavy machinery such as a front-end loader and/or windrow turner. Windrows can be covered or not. This method is often used for agricultural operations or for cities and/or counties.
4. In-vessel – These in-vessel systems can compost anywhere from a few pounds to over 60 tons a day. Compostable materials are placed in the container and mixed, shredded, and aerated by the system. Some in-vessel systems are fully automated with sensors to monitor temperature, oxygen, and moisture. They use biofilters to reduce or eliminate odors. This is a good method for smaller community garden setting or can be large facilities managing larger amounts of compostable materials and limited space.
5. Vermicomposting – This kind of composting uses red wiggler (*eisenia foetida*) worms and microorganisms to do the work of composting. Food waste is broken down and consumed, leaving behind worm castings, a highly valued fertilizer. These systems are also available in a variety of sizes ranging from a 10-gallon (2lb/day) system up to a continuous flow system that could manage all a small home or agricultural farming food waste (over 60 tons/day).
6. Chipping and Grinding – Any activity that mechanically reduces the size of green waste and wood waste to be used for a variety of applications, as allowed by CalRecycle.

Q 4. What are the benefits of processing organic materials?

Implementation of the Organic Materials Ordinance benefits County residents, farmers, community gardens, and commercial composters by establishing practices and thresholds, streamlining processes, allowing partnerships between organic materials generators, and increasing access to compostable materials:

1. Keeping organic material out of landfills
2. Reducing or eliminating of vehicle miles traveled (VMT) and transportation costs to landfills
3. Improving soil health and sustainability by blending compostable materials back into the soil
4. Reducing of GHG emissions from carbon sequestration
5. Increasing water savings and water quality control
6. Reducing erosion and runoff through increased water retention
7. Supporting carbon storage through sustainable farming methods with organic practices
8. Increasing climate resilience to drought and fire risk

Q 5. What are local opportunities for composting training or educational resources?

There are several local entities and/or organizations that provide hands on training and practical methods for composting as well as additional services provided by the County. See links provided below:

County of San Diego – Bin Voucher Program

<https://www.sandiegocounty.gov/content/sdc/dpw/recycling/composting2.html>

County of San Diego – Composting Video

<https://www.sandiegocounty.gov/dpw/recycling/composting.html>

Food2Soil Programs

<https://www.food2soil.net/>
<mailto:info@food2soil.net>

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<http://www.sdcounty.ca.gov/pds>

County of San Diego Recycling Programs

<https://www.facebook.com/CountyofSanDiegoRecycling/>

Solana Center for Environmental Innovation – Educational Programs

[Midscale Composting with Windrows Webinar](#)

[Our Programs](#)

County of San Diego Public Works – Solid Waste Ordinance

[Solid Waste Ordinance](#)

Q 6. What are the different property types for composting operations?

1. Community Composting
 - a. Residential & Agricultural
 - b. Community Gardens
2. Agriculture Composting
 - a. Existing Farm Operations
3. Commercial Composting
 - a. Existing Farm Operations
 - b. Small to Large Scale Operations

Q 7. What are Community Gardens and Community Composting operations?

- A. Community Gardens are an opportunity for unincorporated County residents individually or collectively to develop and maintain a plot of land for the purposes of growing food or flowers and providing areas for mulching and composting. Community Gardens are permitted as amended in Section 6912 Community Gardens.
- B. Community Composting allows for a wider range of composting activities within a specific set of requirements. This type of composting is small in scale (20 cubic yard maximum) and is meant to facilitate composting on the neighborhood level. Community Composting is allowed on any site where an active agricultural operation is present and/or in the RS, RD, RM, RV, RU, RMH, RR, RRO, and RC Use Regulations (refer to Chart A, below).

Q 8. What is Agricultural On-Farm Composting?

Agricultural On-Farm Composting is primarily focused on smaller scale agricultural on-farm operations that allows with a wide range of activities, quantities, operations, treatment methods, materials, and limited permit requirements based on size of operations. On-Farm Composting may occur as an accessory use on any site where an active agricultural operation is present and/or in the A70, A72, C37, C38, C40, S88, S90, S92, M50, M52, M54, M56, and M58 Use Regulations, except village residential and village commercial land use designations. On-Farm Composting must follow these regulations and allowances (refer to Charts B, C and D, below).

Q 9. What is Commercial Composting for Small-Scale Operations?

Commercial Operations for small-scale facilities will require a permit that is based upon the organic material type and prescribed volumes an in-vessel or a facility operation. The streamline permit processing reduces the overall costs and time for applicants. The small-scale operations can occur as a primary commercial use in A70, A72, C37, C38, C40, M50, M52, M54, M56, M58, S80, S82, S86, S88, S90, S92, and S94 Use Regulations (refer to Chart E, below).

1. Small-scale commercial operations are defined primarily by volume which may not exceed 100 cubic yds will require a Zoning Verification Permit. If in-vessel operations/facilities are anticipated, then the volume requirement would be less than 15 tons per day or 105 tons per week.

Q 10. What is Commercial Composting for Medium to Large Scale Operations?

Commercial Operations for both medium and larger scaled facilities require a permit based upon the organic material types and volume, while in-vessel or a facility operation will be defined by tons per day or per week (refer to Chart F, below).

1. Medium & Large-scale commercial operations defined by organic material types processing less than 12,500 cubic yds. requires an Administrative Permit and over 12,500 cubic yds. will require a Major Use Permit.
2. Medium & Large-scale commercial operations utilizing an in-vessel or permanent facilities processing is 15 tons per day or 100 tons per week will require an Administrative Permit and over 100 tons per day or 700 tons per week will require a Major Use Permit.

Q 11. What are Use Regulations?

Use Regulations refer to the element of the zone which indicates, by means of a designator combining a letter and number, the use types which are permitted in that zone. Abbreviations used can be found in the Zoning Ordinance Part 2 Section 1000.

Q 12. What are the differences between the different County Planning Permits Required?

Refer to Chart G below.

Chart A: Community Composting (residential and agricultural)

Organic Material Types for Processing	Volume*	County Planning Permits Required
Agricultural + Green + Vegetative Food	≤ 20 yd ³ (encl. container)	None Required

Chart B: Agricultural Composting (no offsite import, farming partnerships allowed)

Organic Material Types for Processing	Volume	County Planning Permits Required
Agricultural + Green + Vegetative Food + Food	All Volumes	None Required

Chart C: Agricultural Composting (offsite import allowed)

Organic Material Types for Processing	Volume	County Planning Permits Required
Agricultural (used onsite)	All Volumes	Zoning Verification
Agricultural (used onsite)	≤ 100 yd ³	Zoning Verification
Agricultural + Green + Vegetative Food	≤ 12,500 yd ³	Administrative
Agricultural + Green + Vegetative Food	> 12,500 yd ³	Minor Use
Agricultural + Green + Vegetative Food + Food	< 100 yd ³	Zoning Verification
Agricultural + Green + Vegetative Food + Food	< 12,500 yd ³	Minor Use
In-Vessel Agricultural + Dairy + Food (import allowed, used onsite)	> 12,500 yd ³	Minor Use
In-Vessel Agricultural + Dairy + Food	All Volumes	Zoning Verification

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(import allowed, used onsite)		
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Chart D: Agricultural Composting (in-vessel/facilities)

Organic Material Types for Processing	Volume (defined by tons per day (TPD) or tons per week (TPW))	County Planning Permits Required
In-Vessel Operations/Facilities	<15 tpd, 105 tpw	Zoning Verification
	15< x < 100 tpd	Administrative
	>100 tpd, 700 tpw	Minor Use

Chart E: Commercial Operations (small scale)

Organic Material Types for Processing	Volume	County Planning Permits Required
Agricultural + Green + Vegetative Food + Food	≤ 100yd ³	Zoning Verification
In-Vessel Operations/Facilities	< 15 tpd, 105 tpw	Administrative

Chart F: Commercial Operations (medium to large scale)

Organic Material Types for Processing	Volume	County Planning Permits Required
Agricultural + Green + Vegetative Food	≤12,500 yd ³	Administrative
Agricultural + Green + Vegetative Food	>12,500 yd ³	Major Use
Agricultural + Green + Vegetative Food + Food	All Volumes	Major Use
In-Vessel Operations/Facilities	< 15 tpd, 105 tpw	Administrative
In-Vessel Operations/Facilities	>100 tpd, 700 tpw	Major Use

**refers to the total organic material volume onsite at any given time*

Chart G: Planning Permit Overview

Planning Permit	Cost Estimate	Average Time	Approvals
No Permit	-	-	-
Zoning Form	\$500 - \$2,000	-	Over the counter
Administrative	\$10,000 - \$20,000	6 – 12 months	Director
Minor Use	\$15,000 - \$25,000	12 – 18 months	Zoning Administrator
Major Use	\$50,000 - \$100,000	18 – 24 months	Planning Commission

Q 12. What is a Best Management Practice Plan for Organics?

A Best Management Practice (BMP) Plan is a collection of practices, techniques, and measures that prevent or reduce impacts from composting operations by using the most effective and practicable means of achieving organic material composting. BMPs include, but are not limited to, a site plan, siting elements, operational controls, locational and practice controls, and ongoing maintenance procedures that organic materials processing operators can adopt to help run a successful organic processing operation in compliance with applicable requirements of the County of San Diego’s (County’s) Zoning Ordinance and other local, State and Federal Regulations.

Consistent with Zoning Ordinance Section 6977, section “j”, a BMP plan shall be prepared for all Organic Material Processing Operations that demonstrates compliance with all operational and siting requirements as described in the ordinance. The required BMP plan is educational in nature and intended as a tool for organic material operators to ensure compliance with applicable regulations and

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will require an executed “Property Owner/Operator Certificate” acknowledging the organic regulation compliance.

Minimum submittal requirements are providing a detailed project description of the proposed site operations including the type(s) of materials to be processed, site layout, pile dimensions, fire access, water supply, temperature monitoring protocols, drainage and water quality protection measures, management of pests, odors, noise generating equipment and operations, and description of the general operations. Refer to Zoning Ordinance Section 6977 for additional permit and processing requirements.

<https://www.sandiegocounty.gov/content/dam/sdc/sustainability/docs/Organic-Materials-Processing-BMP-Plan.pdf>

Q 13. What do I need to know before establishing an organic materials processing operation?

Prior to establishing an organic materials processing operation or activity, here are a few elements to consider:

1. **Clearing Approval:** Prior to clearing an area for the organic materials processing (composting) activities review the siting criteria described in the Zoning Organic 6977. A potential applicant should verify whether a clearing permit is required. Section 87.501 of the County Codes states:

“Except as exempted by Section 87.502, no person shall do any clearing, nor shall an owner allow any clearing on his or her property or allow the property to remain in an unlawfully cleared condition, unless the person or owner has a valid clearing permit issued by the County Official authorizing such clearing.” County Agricultural Clearing Application.

<http://www.sandiegocounty.gov/pds/zoning/formfields/PDS-216.pdf>

2. **Fire Authority approval:** The local Fire Authority Having Jurisdiction (FAHJ) shall review and approve the plots or site plans prior to issuance of permits for conformance to the current Consolidated Fire Code. It is recommended that coordination with the appropriate Fire Authority begin early in the planning stages to determine the scope of the improvements that will be required for the property, i.e., access (road improvements/design standards for easements, driveways, etc.) and water supply (design standards, fire hydrants, water storage tanks, if necessary). County Fire Authority Plan Check contact information is available at:

<http://www.sandiegocounty.gov/content/dam/sdc/sdcfa/documents/prevention/CFA-20001-FAHJ-Contact-List-Public.pdf>

3. **Stormwater:** All ministerial or discretionary permits for new development and redevelopment projects must comply with the County Watershed Protection Ordinance (WPO) and the Municipal Separate Storm Sewer Systems (MS4) Permit. This will require the preparation Storm Water Quality Management Plan (SWQMP). It is recommended that the strategy for storm water quality compliance be considered before completing a conceptual site design or sketching a layout of the project site. To determine the applicable storm water management requirements as well as options for compliance, go to:

http://www.sandiegocounty.gov/content/sdc/dpw/watersheds/DevelopmentandConstruction/BMP_Design_Manual.html

4. **Zoning:** Sections such as Noise, Odor, Lighting, Fencing, etc. should be consulted, as noted in the Ordinance No. 6977 or any other applicable codes and ordinances shall apply to Organic Composting. Your organic materials processing operation may not require any permits from Planning & Development Services (PDS); however, this will depend on many varied factors that are specific to the property or organic threshold standards as defined in Ordinance No. 6977. Note permits required from other County Departments depending on operations.

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Q 14. What is the role of the Department of Environmental Health and Quality?

Department of Environmental Health & Quality (DEHQ) is designated by the State of California as the Solid Waste Local Enforcement Agency (LEA) for all of San Diego County except the City of San Diego. As the LEA, DEHQ is responsible for processing the project's organic materials operations, application package, and for writing a proposed decision for the composting activities per CalRecycle and the County's Ordinance No. 6977. A state agency, CalRecycle, will review the LEA's proposed decision, consult with PDS, and concur or object, before a final approval is granted.

Q 15. Does this effect my Community Gardens organic materials processing?

The County has amended Section 6912 Community Garden to provide clarification to the intent, use and function of the Community Garden applications. Cross-referenced measures have been incorporated into Zoning Ordinance No. 6977 to allow scalable organic diversion options that is applicable to any community or urban organic implementation.

Additional Information and organic applications can be found with:

- **Planning & Development Services:**
[Application& Forms](#)
[Zoning](#)
[Discretionary Permit Types and Application Forms](#)
- **Department of Public Works:**
[Watershed Protection Program](#)
[Grading Permits and Development Division](#)
[Solid Waste Ordinance](#)
- **Department of Environmental Health & Quality:**
[Community Gardens](#)
[Community Gardens Guidelines](#)
[Water Wells](#)
[Adopted composting orders/water quality/2020/wqo2020_0012](#)
- **San Diego County Fire Authority:**
[2020 County Consolidated Fire Code](#)
- **Department of Agriculture, Weights, and Measures:**
[Agricultural Water Quality](#)
[Environmental Regulations](#)
[Organic Farming](#)
[Plant Health and Pest Protection](#)
- **Regional Water Quality Control Board:**
[Permits, Waivers & Forms](#)
- **Educational Services:**
[Composting Farms and Ranches.pdf](#)