

# Position Statement

## on the disposal of biodegradable plastics through bio-waste treatment (composting and anaerobic digestion)

### By the German waste and bio-waste management associations

#### Context

The EU Commission is currently working on implementing legislation on labels and markings for biodegradable and compostable plastic carrier bags. The new measure stipulates that plastic shopping bags and carrier bags would have to be labelled throughout the EU according to their suitability for both industrial and home composting.

This joint statement sets out the position of the German waste and bio-waste management associations, who are using this process as an opportunity to express their fundamental disagreement with the practice of composting biodegradable plastics.

**The position taken in this joint statement covers all products made of biodegradable plastics such as, amongst others, packaging, disposable tableware and coffee capsules. It also takes issue with the assignment of these products to certain types of waste treatment.**

**Bio-based and certified biodegradable plastic bags, some of which are used as caddy liners in the separate collection of household organic kitchen waste, are not part of the scope of this position.** With respect to bio-based and biodegradable bags, the co-signatories of this position paper are in line with the position of the German Federal Environmental Agency (UBA). UBA states that certified biodegradable bags can only be used if they are listed in Annex 1 of Germany's regulation on bio-waste. They also need to be approved by the relevant local public authorities for waste management and in close co-operation with bio-waste treatment companies.

#### No composting of biodegradable plastic products

The co-signatories acknowledge that the use of products made from biodegradable plastics can be beneficial because:

- Bioplastics are (partially) made of renewable materials, meaning that fossil-based resources are spared; and
- Should objects made of bioplastics be

accidentally or negligently disposed of in the open environment (littering), then these may be less harmful than conventional plastics due to their biodegradable properties.

However, the co-signatories firmly reject the designation or labelling of biodegradable plastic products as "compostable", because:

- Biodegradable plastics offer no added value, neither to the processes used for the treatment of bio-waste nor to the resulting bio-waste end products (i.e. compost and anaerobic digestate);
- Biodegradable plastics may seriously adversely affect the quality of the end products (compost and digestate), as it cannot be guaranteed that they will disintegrate and biodegrade adequately during the course of the different biological treatment processes; this is particularly important given current bio-waste processing timescales. Furthermore, it cannot be guaranteed that at the end of a bio-waste treatment process, particles of biodegradable plastics greater than 1 mm in size (which will be classed as physical contaminants/impurities) will not be present;
- The labelling of biodegradable plastics, or even a mere depiction of these as "compostable", signals that their joint collection with bio-waste is appropriate. However, this is not permitted in Germany according to requirements set in waste and fertiliser legislation; and
- The distinction between household bio-waste suitable for separate collection and composting/anaerobic digestion, and those wastes that are unsuitable for biological treatment, would no longer exist. As a result, the required high purity of bio-waste fractions would thereby be jeopardised.

Furthermore, the depiction of bioplastics as "biodegradable" is not fit for purpose as it lowers the threshold for inappropriate disposal of these materials into the environ-





ment (littering). This principle applies regardless of whether or not biodegradability of a given product has been certified according to one of the European standards for biodegradation and/or compostability.

If incentives, or legally-binding requirements for the use of biodegradable plastic products were to be created in the future, then it would be sufficient to label them in accordance with the relevant standard (e.g. "corresponds to DIN EN 14995").

The composting of products made from biodegradable plastics should not be considered to be recycling. In the context of composting, they add no particular material benefits. Furthermore, their energetic potential remains completely unused.

**The co-signatories consider the disposal of products made from biodegradable plastics via composting and anaerobic digestion to be inappropriate. We therefore oppose incorporation of these materials into biological waste treatment processes!**

#### Disposal routes

In contrast to "biobased" plastic products (which are derived from renewable non-fossil fuel sources), the benefit of products being "biodegradable" or "compostable" should only be used if the product is intended to remain in the environment after its initial use (e.g. horticultural mulch films). Otherwise, it can be assumed that labelling a product as "biodegradable" or "compostable" only serves a marketing purpose. Producers aiming to gain a competitive advantage from such labelling, by giving the impression that the product provides a particular benefit to the environment, is misleading if the product is not used and disposed of as intended.

According to the requirements set in the waste hierarchy, biodegradable plastics should be recycled or used for energy recovery.

Should packaging waste be subject to licensing, then it must be disposed of in accordance with the requirements set in German Packaging law on dual systems (means separate collection in the yellow bin). This also applies to packaging made out of biodegradable plastics. Plastic carrier bags, catering plates and cups are also considered to be packaging according to German legislation, regardless of whether they are biodegradable or not.

Biodegradable plastics that are not classed as packaging must be disposed of as residual

waste (in the residual waste bin). When permitted by the local waste management authority, these items may be collected as non-packaging in the framework of a uniform collection with other recyclable materials. On the other hand, the targeted incorporation of biodegradable plastics into biological waste treatment processes is forbidden.

**In Germany, the ban on the recycling of products made from biodegradable plastics by means of biological waste treatment processes (composting and anaerobic digestion) is well reasoned. The co-signatories strongly support this provision.**

**Labels such as "o.k. for industrial composting" or designating products as "compostable", which lead to biodegradable plastic products entering biological waste treatment plants (composting and anaerobic digestion), must be considered to be misleading and inappropriate.**

#### Co-Signatories

**ANS** Arbeitskreis zur Nutzung von Sekundärrohstoffen und für Klimaschutz e.V.  
[www.ans-ev.de](http://www.ans-ev.de)

**ASA** Arbeitsgemeinschaft stoffspezifische Abfallbehandlung e.V.  
[www.asa-ev.de](http://www.asa-ev.de)

**BDE** Bundesverband der deutschen Entsorgung-, Wasser- und Rohstoffwirtschaft e.V.  
[www.bde.de](http://www.bde.de)

**BGK** Bundesgütegemeinschaft Kompost e.V.  
[www.kompost.de](http://www.kompost.de)

**bvse** Bundesverband Sekundärrohstoffe und Entsorgung e.V.  
[www.bvse.de](http://www.bvse.de)

**DGAW** Deutsche Gesellschaft für Abfallwirtschaft e.V.  
[www.dgaw.de](http://www.dgaw.de)

**FvB** Fachverband Biogas e.V.  
[www.biogas.org](http://www.biogas.org)

**VHE** Verband der Humus- und Erdenwirtschaft e.V.  
[www.vhe.de](http://www.vhe.de)

**VKU** Verband kommunaler Unternehmen e.V.  
[www.vku.de](http://www.vku.de)

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