

DRAFT GENERAL WASTE DISCHARGE REQUIREMENTS FOR COMPOSTING OPERATIONS



OVERVIEW

The State Water Resources Control Board (State Water Board) is preparing an Environmental Impact Report (EIR) for General Waste Discharge Requirements for Composting Operations (General Order) that would cover facilities that collect certain organic material such as leaves, tree trimmings, grass, food leftovers, and scrap paper products to create compost. Compost contains beneficial microorganisms that break down organics into a stable humus-rich soil amendment. Compost helps soils retain moisture and nutrients, potentially reducing runoff and irrigation needs.

Composting operations help keep organic material out of landfills and may help the state to meet its goal to recycle, compost, or reduce 75 percent of solid waste in landfills by 2020. However, composting operations have the potential to pose a threat to water quality. The State Water Board supports the goal of composting, when operated in a manner that protects water quality.

HOW DOES COMPOSTING AFFECT WATER QUALITY?

Composting piles form leachate – a liquid created when certain wastes decompose or as excess moisture flows through the pile. Depending on its source and composition, leachate can contain a wide variety of pollutants, which, if allowed to seep into groundwater or run off into surface waters, could cause water quality problems. Leachate can potentially deplete oxygen in waterways and may contain unacceptably high levels of nitrogen, phosphorus, metals, and other pollutants that could impact waters of the state.

WHO WILL BE AFFECTED BY THIS ORDER?

The proposed General Order will apply to existing and new composting operations, including commercial, agricultural, institutional, and governmental facilities. The General Order will exempt most small composting operations, such as home composting or community gardens.

The proposed General Order will set standards for the construction, operation, and maintenance of composting facilities to protect surface water and groundwater. The proposed General Order provides a number of requirements, including standards for the permeability of the ground underneath the composting piles, drainage, and specifications for leachate collection and containment. The Order will also include requirements for monitoring and reporting.

This is not a new regulatory endeavor. Regional Water Boards previously regulated composting operations under region-specific conditional waivers of waste discharge requirements or general orders. Some composting operations in California are currently operating under individual waste discharge requirements. Individual waste discharge requirements address site-specific conditions and may contain more stringent requirements than what is in the proposed General Order.

PUBLIC PROCESS

The State Water Board follows a strict, legally-mandated process when adopting general orders. There will be multiple opportunities for public comment and discussion. The Draft EIR and General Order was released for public comment on January 13, 2015. State Water Board members consider items for adoption at publicly noticed meetings that are open to the general public. The General Order will be presented to the State Water Board for consideration in June 2015.

HOW TO STAY INFORMED

To keep apprised of the status of the proposed General Order, you can sign up for State Water Board notifications at the link below, check the box for "Composting Operations."

http://www.waterboards.ca.gov/resources/email_subscriptions/swrcb_subscribe.shtml#quality

And you can get more information on the State Water Board web site:

http://www.waterboards.ca.gov/water_issues/programs/compost/

If you have any questions, you can submit them via email to Composting@waterboards.ca.gov.

(Fact Sheet updated 2.9.2015)