

PILOT: Paper Towel Composting

In 2019, the Office of Campus Sustainability piloted composting paper towels in restrooms.

This pilot supports U-M's sustainability goal of reducing waste sent to landfills by 40%.



WHY

This effort was a direct response to a Wolverine Tower waste sort revealing that 5% of building waste was restroom paper towels.

Paper towels are compostable, so if this source could be composted, that would open up new avenues for waste reduction.

HOW

- Placed compost bins with specific signage in restrooms and just outside of restrooms to test user preference and impact on usage and contamination levels.
 - For example: next to sink, under the hand driers, near exits.*
- Experimented with removing landfill bins in a few restrooms.
- Piloted for one month, while monitoring regularly for contamination.
- Conducted a comprehensive waste sort of Wolverine Tower to verify the contents of compost bins.

WHERE

Wolverine Tower

Office building with fairly consistent occupants and high engagement.

Hatcher and Shapiro libraries

More transient population, including high student use.

WHAT WE LEARNED

- Contamination was minimal.
- The presence of landfill bins in the restroom was critical to avoiding contamination from menstrual products.
- Most users moved bins near the door regardless of the original placement.

CHALLENGES

- Consistent use of compostable liners
- Replacement of signage
- Much of the paper towel was still being placed in the landfill bin, which cannot be removed or else contamination skyrockets.
- Dry paper towels—without other compostable materials to help compact them—take up an exorbitant amount of space in the compost truck.



CONCLUSION

Because dry paper towels take up so much space, it's difficult for the compost truck to complete its route, including picking up heavier compost that contributes more to U-M's waste reduction goal. Therefore, restroom paper towel composting is not being expanded at this time, although it has been maintained in the three pilot locations. If infrastructure and staffing increase, expansion may be reconsidered.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Use as little paper towel as necessary to dry your hands.

If you have compost bins in nearby locations, take the paper towel there! Paper towel and napkins ARE compostable (not recyclable). When mixed with other compostable waste, these items are compressed and are an important addition to our compost program.

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