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## Compost business booming despite federal budget woes

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Northwest Guardian

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As Department of Defense military and civilian employees begin to feel the pinch of spending cuts tied to the federal budget, personnel at Joint Base Lewis-McChord are finding ways to do more with less — less waste, that is.

Nearly 4,000 tons of JBLM's organic waste are converted to a high-quality soil amendment product and reused annually in multiple projects on and off-base.

"We've used every bit that we've produced every year," said Ron Norton, JBLM Directorate of Public Works Solid Waste and Recycling Program manager describing production over the last six years.

According to a recent solid waste survey, organic waste consisting of grass, leaves, manure, biosolids, chopped wood and food waste represents 40 percent of the base's reused and repurposed waste stream.

In the last four years, the addition of food waste significantly boosted the base's composting operation and its effort to achieve the Army's Net Zero Waste by 2020 program goal.

### From trash to treasure

"Food waste has become one of the largest components of the base's compost product with 670 tons diverted from the waste stream in 2012," Norton said.

Food waste is collected from Army and Air Force Exchange Service restaurants, unit dining facilities, child care centers, Lewis Main and McChord Field commissaries and MWR facilities, and delivered to the JBLM Earthworks composting facility several times a week.

A major contributor, the JBLM Lewis Main Commissary recycled 261,760 pounds of food waste last year and saved \$21,062 in disposal costs.

"All you do is put it in the right container and you save money," said Janet Landon, Lewis Main Commissary store manager. With support from the Defense Commissary Agency headquarters, Landon said she has been able to maximize savings to the commissary and, in turn, "save the government money."

"In this day and age when budgets are so tight we've got to be good stewards of the environment as well as money," she said.

Basewide, our biggest savings is in disposal cost avoidance, Norton said, we're looking at \$300,000 every year in cost savings."

### Meeting industry standards

The recycling program manager said saving money is not the only objective. "It's one thing to make compost. It's another thing to figure out how to use it, he said. "From the product standpoint ... we realized that compost can be a lot of different things. Some people just think of it as dirt; they don't know the difference."



Brendalyn Carpenter/Northwest Guardian  
Al Ponton, JBLM Earthworks engineering equipment operator, mixes a fresh delivery of food waste and other organic material to begin the initial phase of composting.

To establish an identity among industry practitioners, JBLM became the first military base to obtain U.S. Composting Council Seal of Testing Assurance certification.

According to its website, the USCC's STA program is a compost testing, labeling and information disclosure program designed to help customers and members maximize benefits from the use of compost.

"This STA program standardizes compost products across the industry," Norton said. "This standardization really ups the ante as far as having a product that is consistent in its ability to perform as a fertilizer or a soil conditioner," Norton said.

"With the STA certification, customers know what they are getting," he said.

JBLM's compost underwent testing and analysis by an independent lab as part of the certification process. "It is a rigorous ongoing proficiency program in which blind samples are taken and testing is done from quarterly to monthly depending on how much compost a facility produces," said Al Rattie, USCC STA program manager. "(The) compost must pass the highest level of Environmental Protection Agency standards for metals and pathogens."

Base officials said JBLM's compost earned superior ratings. "When you look at a product standard from low to high quality, ours came out as the highest quality product out there," said Ken Smith JBLM Directorate of Public Works Environmental Operations chief.

Compost produced at the earthworks, which can now be labeled "USCC STA certified," is sold to local businesses throughout the state for storm water control, landscaping and construction projects.

A potential customer, the Washington State Department of Transportation, is one of the largest users of compost product throughout Washington state, Smith said.

According to Rattie, eight state DOTs, including Washington state, require participation in the program to sell compost to the DOT or its contractors.

### **Delivering benefits to JBLM**

Revenue and savings from the operation go to the Qualified Recycling Program and is further distributed to support Family and Morale, Welfare and Recreation programs.

The majority of the soil enhancement material remains on JBLM.

"We can sell as much as 3,000 yards per year, but I'd prefer to use it for on-base projects," Smith said. "When you use it to amend soils, it can improve growing capacity for plants and reduce watering requirements for newly planted plants or even sod."

Rod Gilbert, a contractor for DPW Fish and Wildlife, seeded a 25-by-15-foot area of the prairie on JBLM last fall, hoping to grow several rare plant species that host the Taylor's checkerspot butterfly larvae as part of a habitat restoration project. He returned in the early spring to find the plants had grown to nearly four times their normal size.

Gilbert credits the compost he used from JBLM's Earthworks with producing "phenomenal" results.

"One of the hardest things we try to get going (in the prairies) is the larval host plants," Gilbert said. Taylor's checkerspot butterflies are really specific in the larvae stage as to the types of plants they can eat; and we've had a really tough time establishing these hosts naturally in the prairie, he said.

In October 2012, U.S. Fish and Wildlife proposed to list the Taylor's checkerspot butterfly as an endangered species under the Endangered Species Act of 1973. The rare species thrives in the prairies located in JBLM's artillery impact areas, some portions of Olympia and Oregon. An ESA listing could impact the ability to conduct training on the joint base.

Gilbert said the quality of product that goes into seeding plants for habitat restoration is critical. For example, the abundance of host plants increases the butterfly larvae's survival rate, and could potentially support efforts to reintroduce the Taylor's checkerspot population in other areas of the Pacific Northwest.

The value compost brings to the base, as in Gilbert's program, is in sustaining our training lands. If it helps us to recover species that are threatened and endangered, it's going allow us to continue training here on the base, Smith said.

"And if this helps us do that ... and not have us (become) the only bastion for butterflies, that's a great thing," Norton said 4,000 to 5,000 yards of compost have been allocated for use in additional JBLM Fish and Wildlife habitat restoration projects that are planned over the next two years.

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