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[Sports](#)
[Weekend](#)
[Community Ledger](#)
[Viewpoint](#)
[Education](#)
[Transitions](#)
[Health Beat](#)
[Sustainability](#)
[Across DOD](#)
[JBLM](#)

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Pilot tests biodegradable bowls, cups

By Julie Smith
Northwest Guardian

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Joint Base Lewis-McChord is working to reduce waste in its food service facilities, finding ways to salvage everything from your food to the plate under it. JBLM became the first Department of Defense test site for a pilot program using compostable serviceware last week.

The goal is to increase the awareness and availability of sustainable products in DOD, said Mike Kyser, Madigan Army Medical Center's deputy chief of environmental health services. Madigan's dining facility and McChord Field's Olympic Dining Facility were chosen as the JBLM food service demonstration sites. The transition to compostable serviceware occurred May 15.

Directed by the Office of the Secretary of Defense and the Defense Logistics Agency, the program replaces plastic or Styrofoam single-use food service items — take-out containers, cups and cutlery — with items made of biodegradable material that can be turned into compost.

Patrons of the two JBLM dining facilities are evaluating the performance and safety of the compostable serviceware, and are completing surveys to provide feedback.

"We have to make sure it's usable for people — that it's not going to be dripping, leaking or spilling," Kyser said.

DOD sustainability program manager Dave Asiello cites several benefits of the program, including environmental advantages and fiscal responsibility.

"We know that more sustainable products save money in the long run and more importantly, enhance our mission," Asiello said.

In recent years, the DOD has committed to increasing the use of sustainable materials to meet federal regulations, reduce environmental impacts, reduce dependency on foreign oil and help meet DOD strategic sustainability performance plan goals, a National Defense Center for Energy and Environment report states.

Kyser ardently supports the program that could help Madigan become recognized as a green sustainable hospital, and support JBLM's goal of net zero waste.

"If we can compost it, it's not going in the trash, which saves us money," he said. "And we're being good stewards of the environment."

But Kyser also admits the program faces challenges. JBLM has its own composting facility that can accommodate only small amounts of compostable material. Disposing of compost off the installation would be an added expense, and the compostable serviceware costs more than traditional plastic or Styrofoam containers.

Even with these challenges, Kyser remains optimistic the program will work.

"It's a great opportunity to have a sustainable operation in the food service area of the hospital. We've come a long way," he said. "To get to this point is actually amazing. It's the right thing to do."

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Julie Smith/Northwest Guardian
Madigan medical technician Cristina Padilla, middle, uses new compostable serviceware to carry her lunch.

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