



## **USDA Moves toward Zero Waste Cafeterias**

USDA is charged by law with implementing the Federal BioPreferred<sup>SM</sup> program designed to encourage the purchase and use of biobased products by Federal agencies and to also set an example for the rest of the Federal government. One of the ways USDA is leading by example is in removing single use petroleum-based food service products (plates, bowls, trays, cups, cutlery, etc) from our Washington, DC area cafeterias and replacing these items with food service products made from renewable agricultural materials which can be composted and returned friendly to the earth.

By utilizing compostable biobased products in the Department's Washington, D.C. cafeterias, USDA will significantly reduce its waste stream. The goal of this effort will be to make the cafeterias as close to zero waste as possible, with all products being composted and returned as nutrients to the soil.

In August 2005, USDA teamed up with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) on a pilot project at its smaller cafeteria in the Whitten Building to test the use of biobased food service products which were then composted at the Agricultural Research Service's (ARS) Beltsville Agricultural Research Center (BARC) in Beltsville, MD. From that pilot test lessons were learned. These included the: 1) difficulty in finding appropriate products, 2) high cost of products, 3) necessity of management support, and 4) success of composting. USDA is now engaged in replacing the majority, if not all, food service items in USDA's Washington, DC area cafeterias on an on-going basis as funding permits. "This is not a test."

"Trust but verify" is the motto of the dedicated [Cafeteria Green Team](#) working to ultimately put together a workable green cafeteria program that can be replicated by Federal and other large feeding operations in DC and around the country. Indeed, word has spread that USDA is working to replace petroleum-derived food service items and other Federal cafeterias, including those in the U.S. Capitol complex, want to get involved. While USDA welcomes interest and input from other agencies, the agency just wants to make sure there are no surprises and that every product works as advertised.



USDA cafeteria green team evaluating possible products.

Building on the lessons learned from the 2005 pilot test, since January 2007 USDA's Departmental Administration has been working with other USDA employees, representatives from other Federal agencies, a few private sector individuals knowledgeable in food service items, Sodexo--USDA's cafeteria operation contractor, and Sysco--primary supplier to Sodexo of food service products, to collect information on possible replacement items for petroleum-based food service items in USDA's Washington, DC area cafeterias. This task has proven more daunting than originally anticipated because USDA's policy is to examine all items carefully. As one wag commented, "you only have one chance to make a good first impression." The team knew from the Whitten pilot test that finding the right products was not going to be easy. Further, the team discovered it is difficult to ascertain final costs for such products since USDA will generally not be buying directly from the manufacturers and not all products are functioning as advertised or may not be readily composting according to ASTM 6400 standards.

In late Spring of 2007, USDA removed the Styrofoam carryout trays from its Headquarters cafeterias and replaced them with molded recycled paper trays which compost and actually function better than the Styrofoam trays. Security guards stationed at the entrance and exits of the cafeterias report that because the recycled paper trays are more stable than the Styrofoam trays there have been fewer spills when people carrying food on trays fumble to show their ID badges to the guards.

Often, though not always, renewable food service items may be more expensive than their petroleum-based counter parts items. To get best value we are engaged in a two phase process using savings realized from other parts of the cafeteria contract and without increasing food costs to patrons.

Soon the team will make other recommendations for Phase I replacements such as eliminating the Styrofoam plates and bowls. Styrofoam plates were replaced with paper plates in June of 2007 and as soon as the stock of existing Styrofoam bowls is depleted all plates and bowls being used will be manufactured from high quality compostable paper. The team expects to recommend “Clam shells” (hinged containers) currently being made from petroleum plastic be replaced by PLA bioplastic made from corn. These PLA items will be for cold use only. For hot use a clam shell made from bagasse (sugar cane fiber) will be used. Clear petroleum plastic containers used for cold “grab and go” items, will be replaced with PLA bioplastic. The team will also suggest cold use Styrofoam cups and their petroleum based plastic lids be replaced by cups and lids made from PLA. Hot use Styrofoam cups and tops will be replaced by recycled paper cups and compostable lids made from vegetable starch according to planned team recommendations.



Testing the biobased cutlery and compostable plates.

In the meantime, feeding operations in the USDA complex which are run by other concessionaires have replaced Styrofoam cups with paper cups including the operations at the George Washington Carver Center in Beltsville, MD and deli's in USDA's South Building.



The Phase II recommendations of the team will be for cutlery, containers for hot soup and cereal and compostable bags to contain and transport food and cafeteria service items. When the majority of the service products have been replaced, these materials will again be taken to BARC for composting and returned as soil amendment to be used around USDA facilities. To test and refine the larger compost and collection system required for successfully implementing this program, under other sponsorship BARC is currently engaged in collecting and composting food waste only (no service ware) from USDA and other federal facilities so when the final service items are in place at USDA there will be few delays for full recycling of resources.



USDA has made many forward strides in our BioPreferred<sup>SM</sup> program, but much remains to be done. Please join our efforts to reduce the use of finite and polluting petroleum resources in our USDA food service operations and help us move toward a more environmentally friendly society filled with home grown renewable products that reduce our carbon footprint. In USDA cafeterias our patrons not only enjoy the most nutritious, cheapest, and safest food in the world, but very soon they will also be using food service ware actually derived from agricultural materials to help them hold and eat that food.