



AGRICULTURE DEPARTMENT

Patricia Millner, a research microbiologist with Agricultural Research Service, shows off the compost derived from food scraps and other trash at an Agriculture Department cafeteria in Washington.

In Agriculture's cafeteria, everything's organic

By **TIM KAUFFMAN**

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From the trays that carry the food to the food itself, the cafeteria at the Agriculture Department headquarters is going all natural.

The department is leading the way within government in converting its cafeteria from petroleum-based products, such as plastic trays and Styrofoam cups, to products made from organic materials such as corn or sugar cane. Last week, it began selling a line of organic snack food including cookies and crackers.

What's more, Agriculture converts the used corn-based trays and food scraps that otherwise would be thrown away into compost, an organic mulch that is used on the headquarters building's vegetative roof and at other agency locations.

The activities going on in the Agriculture cafeteria are part of a larger effort by the department to encourage the government to purchase products made of biological or agricultural materials, called biobased products.

"The cost of petroleum is making everybody take another look at what they're doing. Plus, there's a recognition that there is something we can do to decrease the amount of greenhouse gases we're emitting," said Ron Buckhalt, who heads up the department's green purchasing program as special projects director for the Agricultural Research Service.

The 2002 Farm Bill directs Agriculture to lead the way in the procurement of biobased products governmentwide and to develop a list of products that meet preferred standards. Few products have been designated as bio-preferred to date, although the department should be adding significantly to that list in coming months.

A major achievement was a November revision to federal procurement rules requiring agencies to buy biobased products to the maximum extent possible, Buckhalt said.

"You can make all the laws you want, but the

power's in the regulations. It takes time to really kick these things into high gear," he said.

In deciding which cafeteria products to purchase, the department is taking a methodical approach to ensure the sustainable products work as well as conventional ones and can be turned into compost.

The Agriculture Research Service in Beltsville, Md., tests every product the department is considering purchasing to make sure it can be composted. Some utensils and other products that are advertised as able to be composted actually are only biodegradable, meaning they still would need to be trucked to a landfill, Buckhalt said.

Besides finding the right products, the other key challenge is coming up with the funds needed to purchase them, said Terry Sullivan, district manager for Sodexo Government Services, the Gaithersburg, Md., company that runs Agriculture's cafeteria. Green products can cost anywhere from three times to 10 times as much as conventional alternatives.

"Everybody's trying to figure out how to pay for it. That's the rub," Sullivan said.

The department has spent \$30,000 so far this year to purchase food trays, takeout trays and other products, but it will take another \$250,000 to completely eliminate petroleum-based products in the cafeteria, Buckhalt said.

Other agencies such as the Interior Department and Smithsonian Institution are watching what Agriculture is doing. With more than 6 million Smithsonian visitors a year, the prospect that that agency could go green is especially attractive, said Patricia Millner, research microbiologist at the Agricultural Research Service.

Millner and Buckhalt were displaying the biobased products, and the compost that ultimately comes of them, to employees at Agriculture's South Building cafeteria last week.

"We're trying to encourage this," Millner said, while handing out free bags of compost to employees passing by. ■

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