

Compostability Standard and Certification Protocol

As a form of recycling, composting transforms the compostable fraction of the waste stream into compost, a valuable resource for soil health and productivity. Many items such as leaves, banana peels and apple cores are known to be compostable. Now a variety of products and packaging are being introduced into the Canadian marketplace with claims of compostability. This new standard and certification protocol will substantiate compostable product and packaging claims in Canada.

What is the compostability standard?

The compostability standard (Standard *CAN/BNQ 0017-088*) includes a set of criteria that products and packaging must meet to prove that the material is compostable. The standard is based on an existing international standard ISO 17088: *Specifications for Compostable Plastics*. Only minor amendments to the international version were required (e.g., to the labelling requirements for compostable products) to ensure the resulting Canadian standard is relevant and understandable in Canada.

What is the compostability certification protocol?

The compostability certification protocol (*BNQ 0017-988*) identifies the requirements, process and labelling for the certification of compostable products and packaging in accordance with the compostability standard. Manufacturers may apply to the Bureau de normalisation du Québec (BNQ) for review and testing of their product or packaging. Upon successful analysis, a Certificate of Conformity is awarded to the manufacturer, permitting the use of the “certified compostable” claim in association with the specified product or packaging.

What is the Mark of Conformity?



Once approved and certified as compostable, the product or packaging may utilize the Mark of Conformity. Display of this logo provides assurance that the product or packaging can be composted in municipal or industrial composting facilities, where accepted in accordance with local compost quality requirements.

Who developed this standard?

The Bureau de normalisation du Québec (BNQ) revised ISO 17088: *Specifications for Compostable Plastics* to Standard *CAN/BNQ 0017-088* with support from the Canadian Council of Ministers of the Environment. Founded in 1961, BNQ is a member organization of the National Standards System of Canada and operates in:

- standards development
- product, process, service and personnel certification
- certification of quality and environmental management systems.

BNQ acts in compliance with standard-setting rules established by the International Organization for Standardization.

Can the word “compostable” be used without certification?

Yes, the use of the word “compostable” is currently not regulated by any jurisdiction in Canada; therefore certification is not required to use it. However, certification does provide a benefit. The purpose of voluntary certification is to garner consumer confidence by ensuring credible third-party verification of manufacturers’ compostability claims. Once certified, the product or packaging can bear the Mark of Conformity in its marketing and labelling to advertise that its claim of compostability has been verified.

What determines whether a product or packaging can be certified as compostable by BNQ in Canada?

The product or packaging must successfully meet all the criteria set out in *CAN/BNQ-0017-088*. The criteria focus on four main elements:

- biodegradation
- disintegration during composting
- negative effects on the composting process and facility, and
- negative effects on the quality of the resulting compost.

Does the term “compostable” mean the same as biodegradable or disintegration?

No. It is important to be aware that "compostable" and "biodegradable" and “disintegration” are not equivalent. The key distinguishing features between the various terms are time and end result. For both biodegradation and disintegration, there is no reference to the amount of time needed for decomposition or the type of physical and chemical quality attributes of the end product produced through the decomposition process. This means that the material can simply be broken down into smaller pieces of the original material. In contrast, the term “compostable” means that the material is capable of undergoing biological decomposition, within a specific time period, that results in the material being visually indistinguishable from finished compost, and being broken down into carbon dioxide, water, inorganic compounds and biomass.

Why is there a need for a compostability standard in Canada?

Composting is a process that transforms organic waste residuals into compost. Compost facilities are operated according to jurisdictional standards or guidelines that govern the materials that can be accepted for composting, the operation of the compost facility, and the quality of the compost product that is created. Any inputs into the composting process must not negatively impact the operation of a composting facility or the compost product produced.

The compostability standard provides a level of assurance that the specific product or packaging can indeed biologically degrade in accordance with jurisdictional standards and not impact the compost quality produced.

As a manufacturer of products or packaging, am I required to certify my products or packaging to claim that they are compostable?

No. Certification is voluntary.

Will all products and packaging that are certified as compostable be accepted and composted at my local compost facility?

Not necessarily. The compostability standard and certification protocol provide a level of assurance to compost facility operators that the certified products and packaging will biologically degrade in accordance with specified criteria and not negatively impact the compost produced. However, it does not guarantee that the material is suitable for composting at a specific facility. Whether certified compostable products or packaging are accepted at a compost facility will be dependent on such factors as the compatibility of the product or packaging with the facility's operating equipment and the duration necessary to compost product or packaging.

If the products or packaging are not accepted at a compost facility now, could this change in the future?

Yes, the establishment of Canada's existing compost facility infrastructure is relatively new. Existing facilities may not have the equipment or processes in place to compost certain products or packaging. As more certified compostable products and packaging are introduced into the marketplace, there may be greater opportunity to consider operational improvements at compost facilities to accommodate their acceptance.

Can certified products and packaging be composted in backyard composters?

Not necessarily. The compostability standard and certification protocol are applicable to large-scale composting where the temperature and decomposition process are controlled. The conditions of a home composter do not necessarily meet these requirements.