

USDA Headquarters Trash Profile March 5, 2012

Background:

The President has mandated through E.O. 13514 that federal facilities divert at least 50% of its waste by 2015. The President also mandated that the federal government also increase its diversion of compostable waste. The Headquarters is also working to have its operations to model USDA missions and initiatives (natural resource conservation and use of biobased products). A trash sort was conducted on March 5, 2012 to determine the effectiveness of our Waste Minimization and Recycling Program and to obtain insight to improve our program. Approximately 400 pounds of trash was sorted.

Over the past few months, the USDA Headquarter Complex had a recycle rate of over 50%. This is a significant improvement since FY 2005 when we were recycling about 20% of our waste. Since FY 2006, our waste stream has fallen significantly. We are currently generating less than half the waste as we were in FY 2006 (from over 1,200 tons/year in the dumpster to less than 600 tons/year).



Findings:

Approximately 78 pounds of recyclable materials were removed from the 400 pound sample. This represents approximately 20% of the waste. The positive news is that there were relatively minor amounts of high grade office paper and cardboard in the office trash. Only a modest fraction of the 54 pounds of paper sorted from the 400 pound sample was newspapers. The bulk of the paper was mixed paper like magazine, unwanted mail, etc. The trash sort results indicate our recycle program is diverting nearly all the office paper and cardboard.



Plastic and glass bottles represented a significant percentage of our waste 6%. This has remained steady for the past several years. Many of the water and soda bottles still had liquids in them which represented another 3% of the waste by weight (a total of 9% of our waste is bottles and liquids). Many of the bottles still had their caps screwed on which makes them difficult to compact and reduces the volume of trash that our compactors can hold. As a result of trash hauler is hauling a lot of air.

There was a modest reduction in compostable waste in the trash. Approximately 8% of the waste was compostable (plates, trays, cups, banana peels, etc.) 60 compostable waste collection containers were recently installed throughout the complex. This has already resulted in a reduction of compostable waste compared to last year.

Overall, there sort reinforces the trends that we are seeing a steady improvement in our recycle and waste diversion rates.

Recommendations:

1. A new janitorial contract will be starting up this year. Work with the contractor to implement an outreach program using the janitorial staff. Perhaps the staff can help with the distribution of recycle/compost information.
2. Work with the food service staff to provide information about what food service products are compostable.