

UF pilot program encourages composting on mass scale

The Office of Sustainability at the University of Florida is in the beginning stages of a program addressing the use of recycled paper towels and ways to help the environment.

UF's pilot composting program involves collecting paper towels from bathrooms around campus. The towels are then combined with food waste from dining halls and residential yard waste to then be hauled to a Watson C&D recycling center for processing.

Composting is a process that involves several elements. Rachel Crawley, a junior majoring in horticultural sciences at UF, explained that composting is “using waste...and breaking [it] down, and using [it] as a soil amendment...so that you are providing the plants with nutrients.”

The UF program is only being rolled out in bathrooms at 43 buildings across campus. Allison Vitt, outreach and community coordinator at the UF Office of Sustainability, said “On average, people use about two and half paper towels per hand [when] drying.”

According to Vitt, UF purchases about 500,000 pounds of paper towels annually. Part of the goal behind implementing the composting program is to be able to divert waste from the landfill and recycle as much as possible.

The pilot program will expand if there is success. Vitt said this is dependent on being able to educate people, keep contamination low, and if the school's recycling partners are able to handle the volume of compostable material as it grows.

The pilot program does not yet save the university any money. In fact, Vitt explained that costs vs. savings are mostly a break-even situation at the moment.

This is predominantly due to a balance between lower disposal costs and additional labor and equipment costs. Vitt remains positive and looks to the future saying she is, "...hopeful that as we see how this plays out, we'll be able to expand this to more buildings across campus."

There seem to be plenty of benefits to this pilot program, above and beyond nutrient-rich soil. Many students have already seen and used the new paper towel composting bins in restrooms and are quite supportive of program.

Kamran Ali, a third-year student studying Environmental Science at UF, said he believes composting to be incredibly beneficial for the soil and that he feels the paper towel bins are very convenient to use.

UF can lead the way in sustainability among higher institutions. The composted paper towel pilot program is being considered a benefit to the environment, is supporting research on campus and is providing nutrient-rich soil to the community while finding new, efficient ways to recycle.

“I think encouraging students...to compost is something that can be [continued]...[at] all universities across the nation,” Vitt said.