

Health Precautions for Composting Food Scraps at Rural Community Scale Operations

Diverting food scraps and other organic waste is an essential solid waste management service. During this period of national emergency due to the COVID-19 pandemic, composting keeps organic resources local and makes a valuable soil amendment. Practiced safely, composting brings communities together while allowing social distancing, provides healthy outdoor activity, and fosters other positive activities, including gardening. Adopting simple, low cost, health measures can keep composters safe.

COVID-19 and Community Composting

Generally, the family of viruses that includes COVID-19 is less stable and are destroyed by oxidants, heat and sunlight. Research shows that “hot” composting (131+ °F) kills the other strains of coronaviruses quickly; the time that it takes materials to decompose in any system, including cold composting, allows for natural die-off. Therefore, handling feedstocks that may be contaminated with COVID-19 is the primary concern for composters. Accordingly, precautions focus on practicing good hygiene and using personal protective equipment, especially during the feedstock mixing and turning phases.

General Guidelines & Good Hygiene for Everyone

- **Take the spread of this virus seriously.** Be a steward of your community public health.
- **Stay home** if you don't feel well in any capacity, or if anyone you have been in close contact with has a fever, chest pain, shortness of breath, coughing, or other flu symptoms.
 - If you don't feel well, **check your temperature**; any elevation in temperature should result in self-quarantine.
- **Stay hydrated and healthy.** Exposure does not necessarily mean you will contract the virus; if your immune system is in good shape, you will have a good chance of preventing infection. Eating well, getting regular sleep and some exercise will help you stay healthy!
- **Practice good hygiene:**
 - **Wash hands regularly**, especially before and after contact with others and going in and out of public places. Wash with soap and warm water for 20-30 seconds (sing “Happy Birthday” song 2-3 times); vigorous rubbing is recommended. Use hand sanitizer if soap and water are not available.
 - **Wear a (handmade) facemask** when out in public, including at the compost site; handmade masks can be used with or without filter inserts.
 - **Cough or sneeze into your elbow or your shirt** (stick your face into neck hole).
 - **Avoid touching your face** (including your eyes!).
- **Identify and actively prevent exposures**
 - **Practice social distancing (at least 6 feet)**; avoid hugging, kissing, fist bumps or hand shaking, sharing food or drinks, etc.
 - **Avoid group gatherings** and non-essential public exposure; limit composters allowed on site to the number who can safely practice social distancing.
 - **Wear protective gear** when appropriate to the task.
- **Understand the virus and how it spreads**
 - This virus spreads more than twice as easily as the regular flu.
 - While the average healthy person is unlikely to become very sick, this virus is more deadly than similar viruses in specific populations, especially the elderly and those with compromised immune systems. People carrying the virus can be contagious long before they have symptoms, and some people never display symptoms.
 - You can become infected through your eyes, nose and mouth.
 - The virus may survive on some surfaces for up to four days.
- **Stay informed**, especially about what is happening in your community. Recommendations for social distancing and use of personal protective equipment (PPE) are changing frequently; stay up to date with recommendations from your local health departments and governments.

Remember: *Prevention is the only meaningful strategy for containing this pandemic. This requires collective commitment to containment and transmission risk reduction. This is bigger than you; your actions affect your community.*

Considerations and precautions for rural community-scale composting:

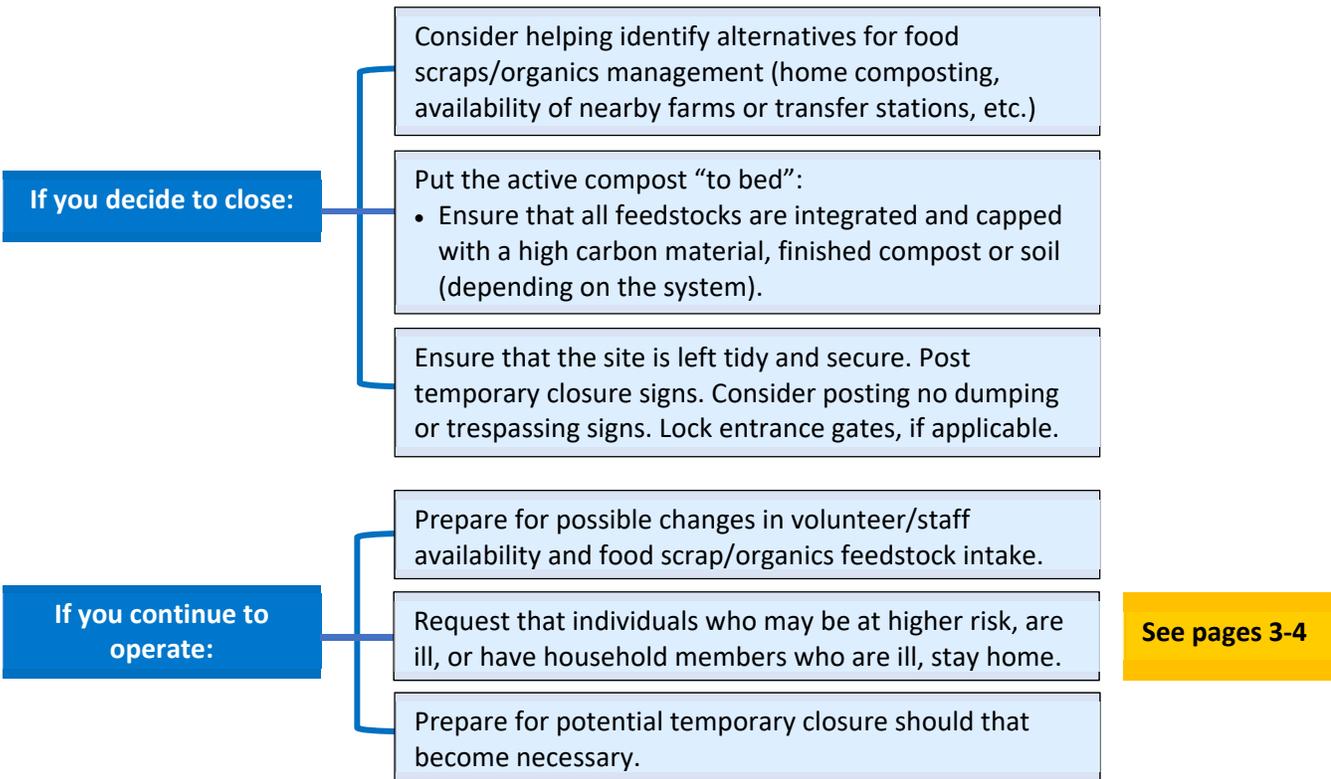
Please note that this guidance is not intended to override local, state, or national directives. If you have questions specific to your site, please contact your local solid waste management program, health department, or composting association.

The following guidelines are for rural community composting sites where people drop off food scraps and other organics, regardless of the drop-off system. There are different considerations for sites that collect organic materials to bring to a community compost site (hauling).

1. Should you continue to operate your site during the Stay Home-Stay Safe/Shelter in place directives?

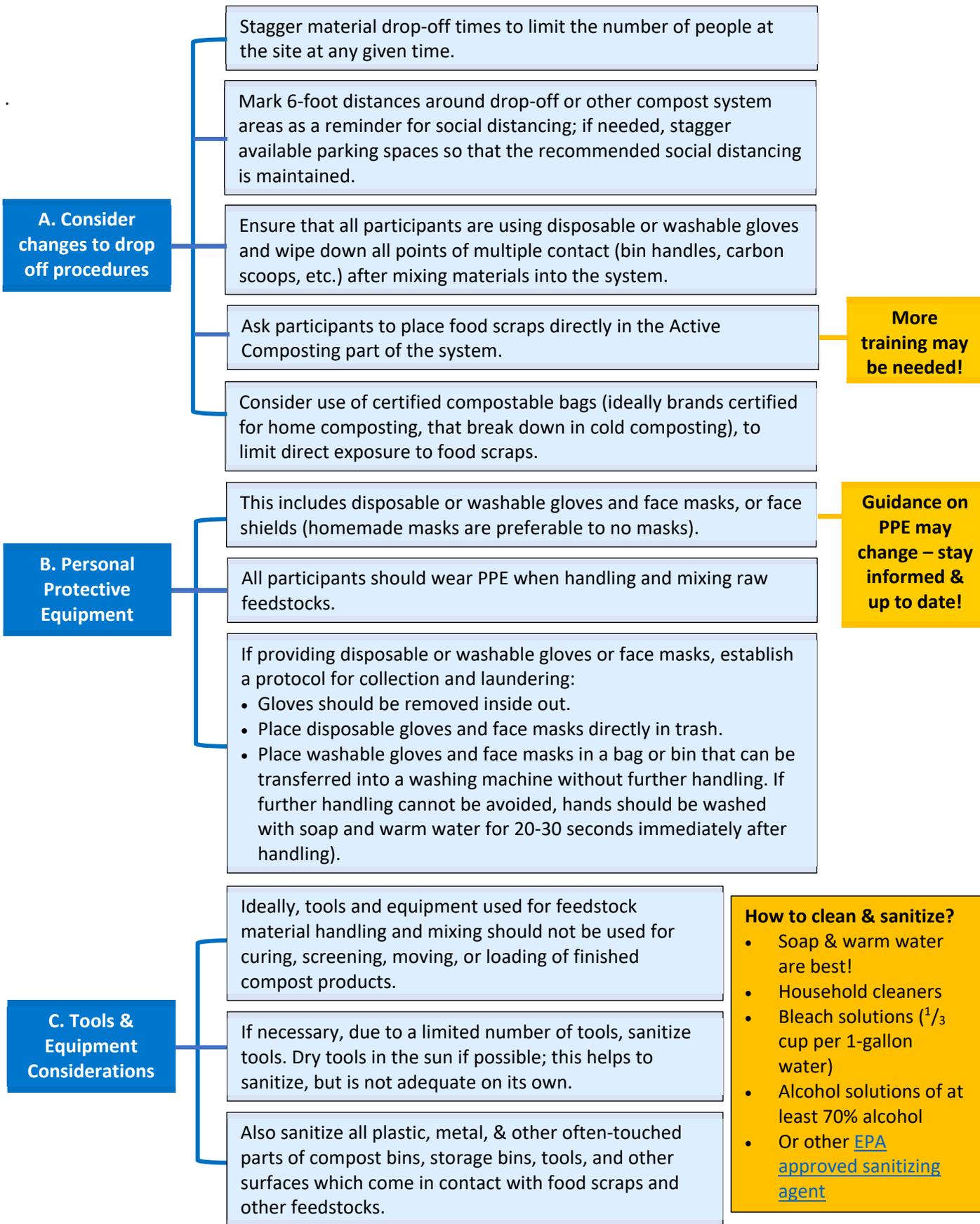


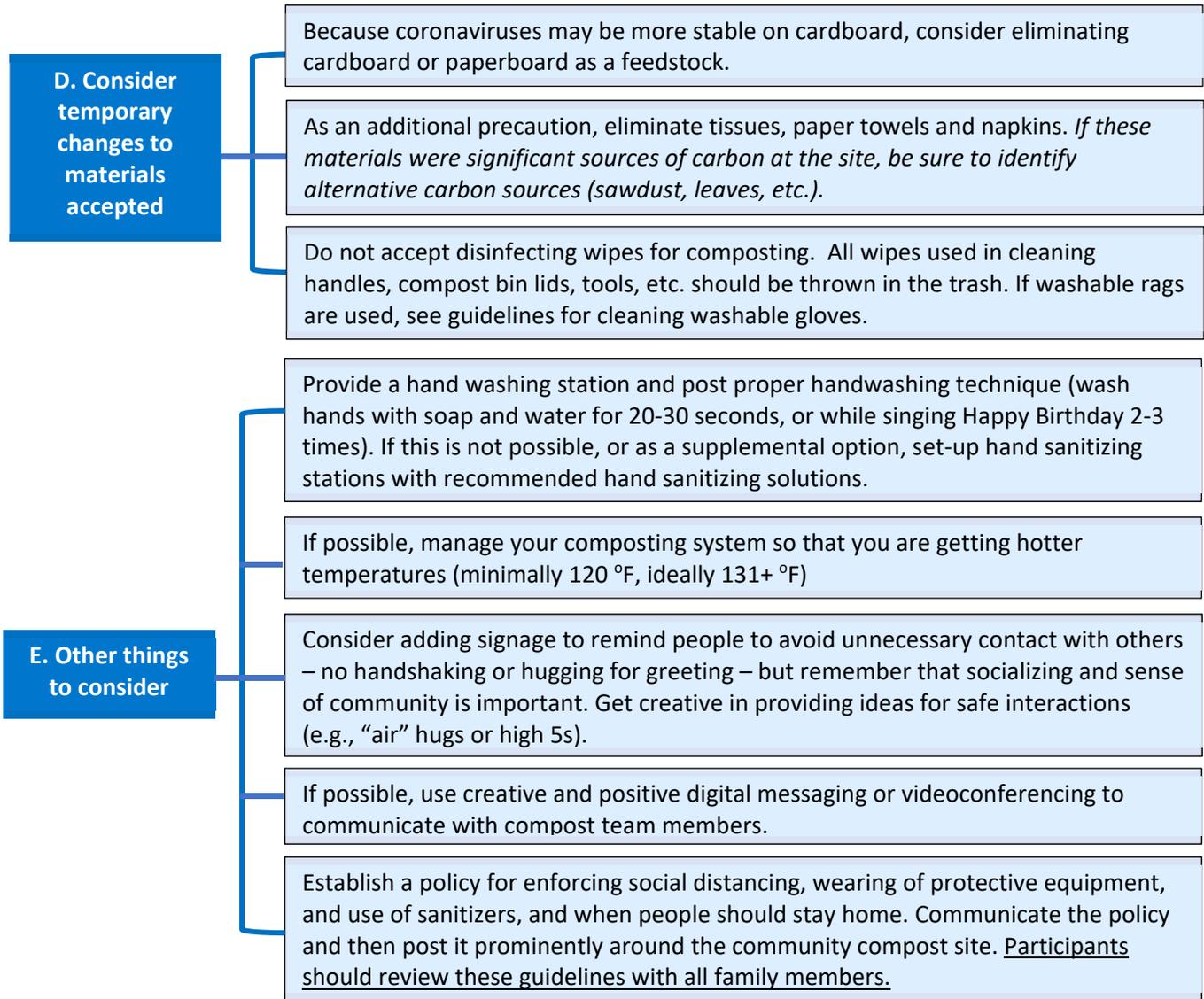
Consider the answers to these questions when making decisions about managing your site.



Let your members know! Whether you decide to continue to operate or to temporarily close, communicate with everyone involved at the site. Also be sure to let neighbors know—remind them that diverting food scraps and other organic waste is an essential solid waste management service, even in the time of COVID-19, and share your safety protocols with them. Additionally, post signs at the site indicating new protocols or temporary closure.

2. If you decide to continue to operate:





Composting for Community Resiliency

Composting is a vital part of community infrastructure. It allows all of us to take action for a sustainable future, by reducing methane-generating materials (greenhouse gases) from the landfill. Composting permits communities to control their own recycling of these local organics to make valuable soil amendment.

With precautions and commonsense, home and community composting, along with other options for diverting food scraps (through transfer stations, curbside collection), can continue to be practiced. Each of us, of course, needs to be responsible for our own health, that of our family’s, and our community.

Notes:

The Food and Drug Administration has a [list of home cleaning products](#) that are known to kill Covid-19. This virus is an [enveloped virus](#) so it doesn’t survive well in soap and alcohol.

US EPA List of Approved Coronavirus Disinfectants: <https://www.epa.gov/newsreleases/epa-expands-covid-19-disinfectant-list>

This guidance was adapted from a number of sources, including United States Composting Council (USCC), BioCycle, and compost experts.

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