



Rhode Island House Passes Bill to Legalize Human Composting

On June 11, the Rhode Island House of Representatives approved legislation that would legalize “human composting” as an alternative to traditional burial or cremation. [The bill, H7212](#), now moves to the state Senate for further consideration.

Human Composting vs. Climate Change

The proposed legislation aims to establish guidelines for the operation of facilities dedicated to so-called natural organic reduction (NOR), a process of converting human remains into soil. This process is performed in specialized facilities equipped with vessels. Deceased bodies are placed in these vessels along with organic materials like wood chips and straw. The chambers maintain a warm temperature between 130 and 160 degrees and regularly blend the contents over four to seven weeks. This environment allows microbes and heat to transform the remains into about a cubic yard of compost.



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[According](#) to the press release posted by a principal author of the bill, Rep. Michelle McGaw (D), “human composting” is a way to reduce someone’s “carbon footprint” even after that person is no more:

Natural organic reduction is the contained, accelerated conversion of human remains to soil, performed in a disposition facility. Sometimes called “human composting,” it is an option that is increasingly being chosen by those who would prefer to lessen their impact on the environment when they have reached the end of their life.

She added,

Not everyone is comfortable with the impact of burial, which occupies land, or cremation, which emits a significant amount [of] carbon. Natural organic reduction is a greener alternative that may be preferable for those concerned about how their final wishes affect the planet.

According to the Rhode Island advocacy group [“Recompose,”](#) which provides the service for \$7,000 per body, choosing a “human composting” service over traditional burial or cremation can prevent one metric ton of carbon dioxide from being released into the atmosphere per person, which is, apparently,



Written by [Veronika Kyrylenko](#) on June 21, 2024

“equivalent to the CO2 emissions of driving 2,481 miles or 1,102 pounds of coal.”

The group, as did McGaw, argues that “current funerary practices are environmentally problematic,” as cremation relies on burning fossil fuels, releasing carbon dioxide and particulates into the air. Conventional burial, on the other hand, consumes urban land, pollutes the soil, and contributes to climate change through the resource-intensive production and transportation of burial auxiliaries such as caskets, headstones, and grave liners, the organization laments.

McGaw’s bill allows “disposition facilities,” including those that already offer cremation, to provide “natural organic reduction” if they so choose. This legislation does not change the availability of burial or cremation for Rhode Islanders; instead, it introduces a third option.

Support and Opposition

According to a report in [The Boston Globe](#), the legislation “drew vehement opposition, enthusiastic support, and more than a few questions from perplexed and slightly creeped-out lawmakers.”

The report reads, in part,

Representative Camille F.J. Vella-Wilkinson, a Warwick Democrat, backed the bill.

“We are not talking about turning people into ‘[Soylent Green](#),’” she said, referring to a 1973 science fiction film in which a wafer-like food is made of corpses. “This says to Rhode Island that your legislators really are willing to think outside of the box.”

She said there is “something beautiful” about the idea of scattering composted remains in a forest, for example. “Talk about a tree of life,” Vella-Wilkinson said. “That, to me, is absolutely lovely.”

Despite the support, the concept of “human composting” has not been seen as “lovely” by other legislators.

According to the *Globe*, Rep. Barbara Ann Fenton-Fung (R) expressed discomfort with the idea, stating it “creeps me out.” She also expressed worries about the impact of “composting” the bodies of those who died of infectious diseases.

Rep. Arthur Corvese (D) voiced concerns about the broader implications, describing the procedure as a continuation of “the culture of death and callousness” and “disrespect for life.”

Rep. Charlene Lima (D), who opposed the bill, echoed the sentiment, saying that a vote in support of such a measure would send “a clear philosophical and religious message” that “you view human remains as nothing more than any other form of refuse that we discard.”

She also shared her thoughts on social media, writing, “I feel human remains must be treated with dignity and respect.” She acknowledged the innovative thinking behind the bill, but ultimately argued for more traditional methods.

Today the House passed a human composting bill that I voted against because I feel human remains must be treated with dignity and respect . While I commend the sponsor for thinking outside the box I think we should keep everybody in the box in this case.

— Charlene Lima (@CharleneLimaRI) [June 12, 2024](#)



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In March 2024, Sen. Tiara Mack (D) introduced a [companion bill, S2877](#), to McGaw's.

National Trend

Rhode Island's move toward legalizing "human composting" follows similar legislation in 10 other states — Arizona, California, Colorado, Delaware, Maryland, Nevada, New York, Oregon, Vermont, and Washington. Washington was the first state to legalize the practice in 2019, with the law taking effect in 2020. As more states — Illinois, Massachusetts, Connecticut, and Minnesota — are currently considering passing legislation to legalize "human composting" as an "environmentally friendly" alternative to traditional burial, the debate over its ethical and cultural implications continues.

Some of the staunchest opponents of the practice are Catholic groups that argue that the practice violates religious doctrine and disrespects the human body.

When New York considered its human-composting bill, the New York State Catholic Conference [issued a memorandum](#) saying that their opposition to human composting "stems from [the conference's] reverence for the dignity and sacredness of the human body," which "is sacred because it was made in the image and likeness of God and is a gift, and because Catholics believe in the eventual resurrection of the body."

Science writer Leslie Eastman, commenting at [Legal Insurrection](#), warned against potential mandates, expressing concern that the measure could be potentially forced onto others. She wrote,

I am "pro-choice" for funeral options.... As long as I can make my own decisions in this matter, I don't have an issue with the choices others make.

Unfortunately, recent experience suggests that eco-activists don't hesitate to make their preferences for today everyone's requirements for tomorrow."



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