

Federal Times
October 8, 2012

A Greener Mess Hall Pilot program brings plant-based dining ware to military bases

By Andy Medici

Service members and civilians at two military installations will see their meals get a little greener under a new pilot program by the Defense Logistics Agency. But it won't be the food.

Beginning in November, the agency will temporarily replace all of the flatware, plates, bowls and trays at Joint Base Lewis-McChord and Naval Air Station Whidbey Island in Washington state with items that are 100 percent plant-based and compostable.

The dining ware is made from corn- and wheat-based resin and will have the same look and feel as traditional dining ware, and will be just as sturdy, but it will be light brown in color, according to DLA.

Visitors will be notified with signs posted at the entrances to dining facilities, and the pilot will run anywhere from six to nine weeks -- until supplies run out.

The new dining ware is the newest effort by the Defense Department to make sure 95 percent of its product purchases and services are environmentally friendly.

The new program is also driven in part by a 2009 executive order by President Obama calling for agencies to recycle 50 percent of their nonhazardous waste by 2015.

The dining ware includes cups in a variety of sizes for hot and cold drinks, as well as lids, straws, soup bowls, salad bowls, compartmentalized food trays, forks, knives and spoons.

Stacey Hajdak, spokeswoman for DLA, said the pilot program could not have happened without the support of the services.

"Before we do anything, we have to make sure we have buy-in from our customers," Hajdak said.

If the program is a success, DLA will begin to roll out compostable utensils throughout DoD, said John Woloszyn, who procures green products for the department. Current flatware is either all plastic or made of half plastic and half plant-based materials, according to Woloszyn.

DLA teamed up with contractor Concurrent Technologies Corp. to make sure the flatware and tableware are comparable in both quality and cost to what the two installations used previously.

"The hope is that people won't notice the difference," Woloszyn said.

Installations will be able to use composting programs already in place to dispose of the utensils without sending them to a landfill.

"All in all, it's going to be beneficial and cost effective," Woloszyn said.

While some installations use plant-based flatware or plates, there is no facility that uses 100 percent plant-based material for all of its dining ware, he said.

Visitors to the dining facilities will be asked to respond to a brief survey rating their experience, which the services will use to decide whether to make the program permanent.

Participating vendors include Bunzl Distribution, NatureWorks LLC, LC Industries, Bridge-Gate Alliance Group, Huhtamaki Inc., Dopaco Inc., Pactiv LLC, Solo Cup Co. and Packaging Dynamics.