SB 279
Frequently Asked Questions

QUESTION 01

Is SB 279 competing with commercial composters?

Short answer: No- it addresses material stream the existing system cannot practically absorb.

QUESTION 02

Didn't farmers already have an agricultural composting exclusion?

Short answer: Yes — but it was too narrow to solve the real problem.

QUESTION 03

What tools support implementation of SB 279, place-based composting- and compost application?

Short Answer: SB 279 creates legal space for local composting, and new mapping and planning tools help communities and farmers put that authority to work effectively.

QUESTION 04

Why focus on large biomass events (LBMEs)?

Short answer: Because that's where the biggest unaddressed material volumes are.

QUESTION 05

Why not just bild more large composting facilities?

Short answer: Time, cost, and geography.

QUESTION 06

Is this mainly a supply-side policy?

Short answer: It's supply-side and demand- shaping.

SB 279
Frequently Asked Questions

QUESTION 07

How does this relate to SB 1383?

Short Answer: SB 279 makes SB 1383 workable.

QUESTION 08

Is composting really “geospatial”? What does that mean?

Short answer: Composting economics depends on transportation distance.

QUESTION 09

Does SB 279 apply to schools or school districts?

Short answer: Generally, yes.

QUESTION 10

Why did SB 278 pass unanimously?

Short answer: Because it solves a real problem without undermining existing systems.

QUESTION 11

What problem does SB 279 actually solve right now?

Short answer: Because that’s where the biggest unaddressed material volumes are.

QUESTION 12

What’s nect beyond SB 279?

Short answer: Increased composting, science-backed approaches to soil regeneration, and deeper integration of compost into soil strategies at every level.

QUESTION 01

Is SB 279 competing with commercial composters?

Expanded answer: SB 279 is designed for place-based processing of agricultural and community-scale materials that are already geographically dispersed, bulky, and low-value per ton.

These materials often cannot afford both hauling and tipping fees, and even if they could, permitted capacity is structurally insufficient and slow to expand.

SB 279 doesn't replace centralized composting — it complements it by handling homeless biomass that otherwise has no workable pathway. That same place-based logic applies to community composting, which plays a critical role in capturing food scraps and landscape materials close to where they are generated—often representing the 'last mile' of diversion needed to make SB 1383 work on the ground.

How to think about SB 279

SB 279 complements centralized composting by creating pathways for materials that are too dispersed, bulky, or place-specific to move through large facilities.

*See extended answer below.

QUESTION 02

What tools support implementation of SB 279, place-based composting – and compost application?

Expanded answer: Before SB 279, agricultural composting could be excluded from permitting only if:

- materials came from the same agricultural operation, and
- compost was returned to that land, with
- very limited ability to blend materials, and
- only small amounts could be sold or given away.

That framework did not work for large biomass management events, which are dominated by woody material that does not compost well on its own.

SB 279 specifically addresses this gap by allowing appropriate blending at scale, enabling actual composting rather than disposal or burning.

QUESTION 03

What tools support implementation of SB 279, place-based composting – and compost application?

Expanded answer: Implementing SB 279—and making SB 1383 work on the ground—requires more than policy. It requires tools that help communities, farmers, and practitioners make informed, place-based decisions.

Two complementary types of tools are emerging to support this work.

PLACE-BASED COMPOSTING TOOLS:

First, are spatial mapping tools, such as those developed by People, Food and Land Foundation (PFL). These ARC-GIS–based tools help identify where organic materials are generated—including food waste, landscape residues, agricultural woody biomass, and manures—and where composting and soil application make the most sense geographically. They are designed to support hyper-local planning, reduce transportation distances, and help match complementary materials—such as “brown” woody biomass and “green” nitrogen-rich inputs—when designing compost recipes.

TOOLS INFORMING COMPOST APPLICATION:

Second, are decision-support planning tools that focus on the demand side: helping determine not just how much compost to apply, but where it delivers the greatest benefit. These tools integrate soil characteristics, land use, climate conditions, and ecological priorities to guide compost application in ways that improve outcomes for soil health, water retention, carbon cycling, and resilience. A version of this approach is currently being beta tested in parts of Northern California, with broader application anticipated.

Together, these tools help translate policy into practice. They support composting systems that are local rather than centralized, planned rather than reactive, and designed to deliver measurable benefits over time—across farms, forests, and communities.

QUESTION 04

Why focus on large biomass events (LBMEs)?

Expanded answer: Large biomass events — orchard removals, vineyard pullouts, forest treatments — produce enormous volumes of woody material in short timeframes.

Historically, these materials were:

- burned,
- hauled to now-closed energy facilities,
- landfilled, or
- spread raw in ways that created nutrient imbalances.

SB 279 creates a real composting pathway for these events — one that cycles carbon and nutrients back into soil rather than losing them.

QUESTION 05

Why not just build more large composting facilities?

Expanded answer: CalRecycle has estimated California may need 50–100 additional fully permitted composting facilities.

In practice:

- permitting often takes 5–10 years,
- CEQA and multi-agency review create uncertainty, and
- very few new large facilities are actually built.

SB 279 doesn't wait for a future system. It enables distributed processing that can begin immediately, where materials already exist.

QUESTION 06

Is this mainly a supply-side policy?

Expanded answer: On its face, SB 279 removes regulatory barriers on the supply side. But functionally, it shapes demand locally by ensuring compost is:

- produced near where materials are generated, and
- returned to nearby soils and communities.

That's true for both:

- community composting, and
- on-farm composting, where surplus supports not only the farm where the biomass is generated but also may support nearby farms.

SB 279 reduces friction so local circular systems can function.

QUESTION 07

How does this relate to SB 1383?

Expanded answer: SB 1383 creates a diversion mandate.

Without SB 279, compliance would often mean:

- hauling material long distances, and
- trucking finished compost back to the same agricultural regions.

SB 279 aligns SB 1383 with geography, economics, and soil outcomes, allowing diversion to happen where it has the greatest benefit. This is a whole-systems approach that is intended to work with and side by side the existing organics diversion and composting infrastructure.

QUESTION 08

Is composting really “geospatial”? What does that mean?

Expanded answer: Organic materials are heavy, bulky, and low-value per ton.

That means feasibility depends on:

- where materials are generated,
- where they’re processed, and
- where compost is ultimately used.

Food waste clusters near population centers.

Agricultural and forest biomass clusters near land.

SB 279 allows composting at the scale and location that fits each material stream.

QUESTION 09

Does SB 279 apply to schools or school districts?

Expanded answer:

While school districts are not listed explicitly, they are typically treated as special districts under California law, which are included in the bill’s definition of a public agency.

Unless determined otherwise in the future, nothing in SB 279 suggests an intent to exclude school districts, and policy intent clearly supports inclusion.

QUESTION 10

Why did SB 279 pass unanimously?

Expanded answer: SB 279 received unanimous approval with support from:

- agricultural producers,
- community composting practitioners, and
- environmental advocates.

That coalition reflects the bill's role as infrastructure alignment, not market disruption.

QUESTION 11

What problem does SB 279 actually solve right now?

Expanded answer:
Today, large volumes of agricultural and forest biomass have —alongside food scraps and landscape materials that are generated within communities but lack nearby processing options:

- no affordable hauling pathway,
- no available permitted capacity, and
- no environmentally sound alternative.

SB 279 provides a durable, non-brittle solution that:

- works under current conditions,
- adapts to future volumes, and
- restores circularity rather than relying on subsidies or temporary programs.

QUESTION 12

What's next beyond SB 279?

SB 279 opens the door. It creates a workable, place-based pathway for composting agricultural and community-scale organic materials that previously had no viable option. In doing so, it addresses an immediate and longstanding gap.

Looking ahead, several important opportunities come into view, including:

- increased composting of manures from concentrated animal feeding operations (CAFOs),
- careful, science-backed approaches to cycling biosolids back into soils in ways that protect public health and soil function, and
- deeper integration of compost into climate, water, and soil strategies at local, regional, and state levels.

Biosolids are often described as the last mile of nutrient circularity—a complex but essential frontier that will require rigorous science, safeguards, and public trust to advance responsibly.

At the same time, SB 279 is intentionally focused on what can begin now. It does not depend on speculative future systems or funding structures. Instead, it enables near-term action while creating the foundation for more integrated, resilient approaches over time.