

# Composting and Mad Cow Disease

## Understanding the risks in using Restricted Animal Material (RAM)

Composting is a good thing to do, for a number of reasons.

However, there is a potentially significant legal issue that people who make compost and those who use it should be aware of in relation to **Restricted Animal Feed or RAM, and preventing Mad Cow Disease.**



**Compost ready for use on the garden or pasture**  
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If you make compost or use it on pasture, you have an important role in helping prevent Mad Cow Disease (BSE) from occurring in Tasmania.

Composting is a good thing to do, for a number of reasons. However, there is a potentially significant legal issue that people who make compost and those who use it should be aware of in the use of “Restricted Animal Material”.

It is against the law to feed “Restricted Animal Material” or RAM to ruminant animals – cattle, sheep, goats, deer, alpacas etc.

This fact sheet explains the issue of RAM as it may affect those who make or use compost.

### We’ve never had a case of Mad Cow Disease – and we never want to...

What we don’t want here in Tasmania or Australia is the serious livestock disease known as Transmissible Spongiform Encephalopathy (TSE). In cattle, that is BSE (the full name being Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy – or more commonly known as Mad Cow Disease. In sheep, it is known as Scrapie.

BSE is a very serious emergency animal disease. Outbreaks overseas have caused massive disruption to the cattle industry.

That has resulted in not only mass slaughter of cattle but also huge job losses and business failures in the cattle and related industries.

Further, BSE can cause a human disease known as variant Creutzfeldt Jakobs Disease (vCJD), which is both incurable and fatal. Almost 200 people have died of vCJD in the UK, since the outbreak of BSE in that country, with smaller number of deaths reported in other countries.

Neither Tasmania nor mainland Australia has ever had a case of BSE and it is in everybody’s interest to keep it that way and to demonstrate to consumers, both domestically and overseas that our meat products are safe.

The issue here is that the materials used to make compost may include Restricted Animal Material (RAM). You must not feed RAM to ruminants because it can include the pathogen that causes BSE in cattle or Scrapie in sheep. It may also contain other animal pathogens if not processed adequately.

**It is important to understand that a small amount of RAM can cause BSE which, in turn, can cause vCJD in humans.**

## What is RAM?

RAM is any feed that contains meat (of any species) or meat meal, bone meal, fish meal and even feathers other than tallow, gelatin, milk or milk products.

RAM also includes compounded feeds made from the above products, as well as unfiltered, used cooking oil.

## How does that relate to compost?

In some cases, compost is made entirely out of plant materials, in which case RAM is not an issue.

However, there are several sources of RAM that are often included in the composting process. For example:

- domestic kitchen scraps
- waste from restaurants, pubs, food processors etc.
- waste from fish farms and fish processing
- blood and bone meal deliberately added to increase nitrogen levels
- spoiled pig or poultry feed
- poultry litter and dead birds
- hay/straw that has been used as pig bedding

## What are your responsibilities when using compost that includes RAM?

It is okay to include RAM in compost. If you use that compost in situations where no ruminant animal can access it, there are no restrictions arising from the RAM feeding ban.

For example, if you use it in your house garden, vegetable patch or around fruit trees, that is fine providing your fencing is adequate and no ruminant animal can access the compost before it is absorbed.

You should ensure that any ruminant animals are also unable to access any compost that includes RAM while it is in storage or in the process of being made. So, make sure all sheds and gates are secure.

If you want to use compost that includes (or might include) RAM in a situation where a ruminant animal might access it – the most common use is as fertiliser on a pasture – you should keep all ruminant animals out of that paddock until there has been sufficient pasture growth to absorb the compost.

In good growing conditions (i.e. with rain or irrigation), this withholding period is recommended to be 21 days. This period of withholding assumes an applications rate of no more than 15 cubic metres of compost per hectare.

This is the same recommended withholding period as for poultry litter or manure that is spread on pasture paddocks. If the rate of application is higher, the withholding period will need to be longer.

## What are your responsibilities if you make compost that includes RAM?

If you sell it, or give it away, you should ensure the person knows that it contains RAM and that they therefore need to consider its use where ruminants are concerned.

We ask that, unless you are sure that the person already knows about the ban on RAM feeding to ruminants and how that applies to using your compost, you give them a copy of this fact sheet.

## Does the ban on feeding RAM to ruminants apply to everybody?

Yes, and this includes hobby farmers – even those with just one pet sheep.

## For more information

If you need more information about RAM and compost or you wish to report a breach of the ban on feeding RAM to ruminant animals, please contact Biosecurity Tasmania on **1300 368 550**.

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