# In a 'return to nature,' California legalizes human composting for environmental benefits

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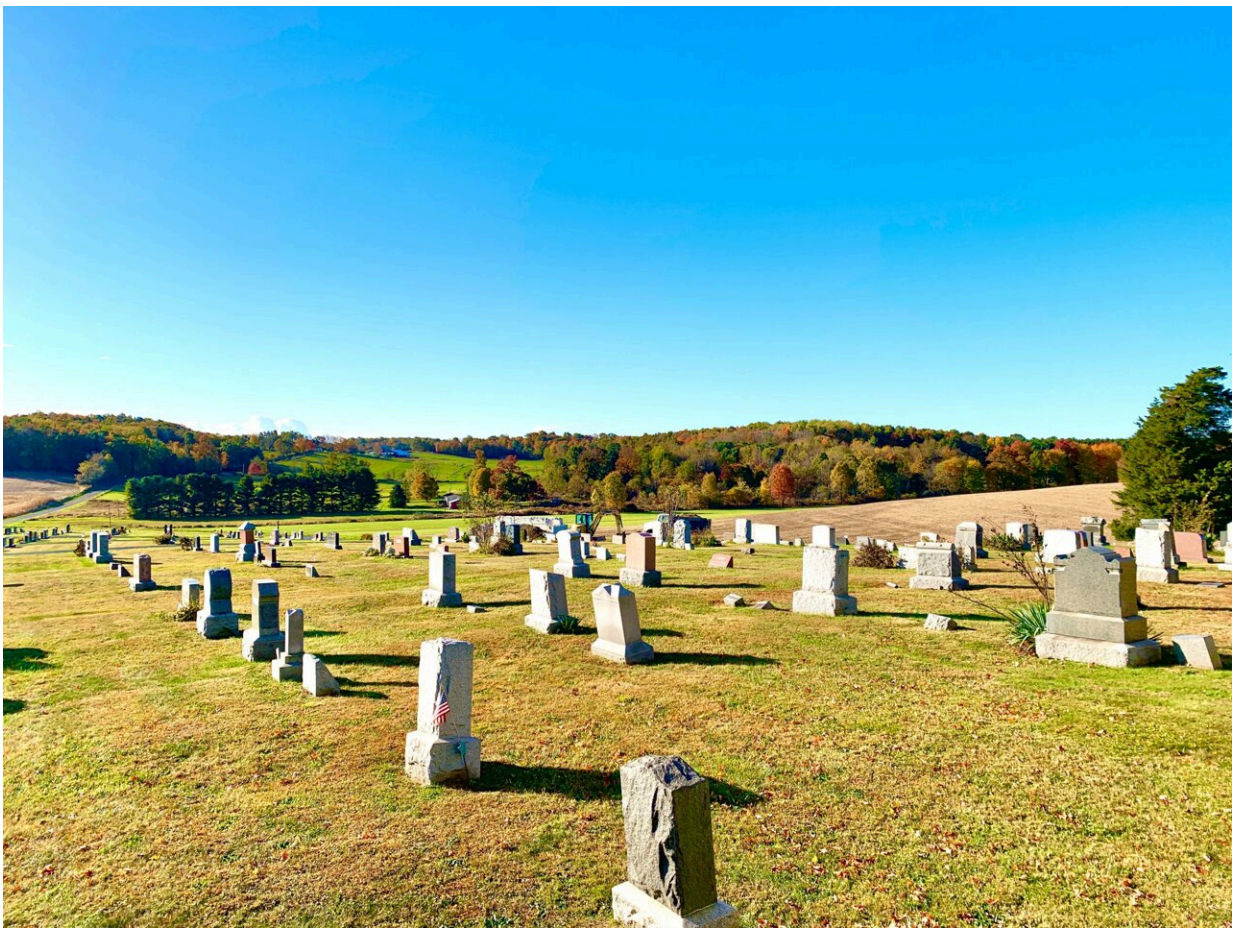

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Californians will soon have a new end-of-life burial option: human composting.

Gov. Gavin Newsom signed a bill into law Sunday that creates a state regulatory process for "natural organic reduction," or transforming human remains into soil. The law will go into effect in 2027.

California is the fifth state to legalize human composting, on the heels of Oregon, Washington, Colorado and Vermont. Advocates say the process is a more environmentally friendly option than casket burials and cremation, and despite the seemingly novel burial method, experts say it's not dissimilar from many cultures' traditional practices of returning a body to the ground.

## What is human composting and how does it work?

The human composting process varies slightly based on the funeral home, but typically a person's body after death is placed in an insulated vessel packed with organic material to help the decomposing process.

The Natural Funeral, the lone funeral home in Colorado that offers in-house human composting, uses a 7-foot long insulated wooden box filled with wood chips and straw. It has two large spool wheels on either end, allowing it to be rolled across the floor and providing the oxygenation, agitation and absorption required for a body to compost.

After about three months, the vessel is opened and soil is filtered for medical devices and large bones. Those remaining bones are pulverized and returned to the vessel for another three months of composting. Teeth are removed to prevent contamination from mercury in fillings.

Recompose, a Seattle-based human composting company that's expanding in Colorado, uses a similar process: the company collaborated

with Washington State University in 2018, setting up a pilot project with human donors to make sure the human composting process was safe and effective.

The vessel must reach 131 degrees Fahrenheit for 72 continuous hours to kill any bacteria and pathogens. The high temperature occurs naturally during the breakdown of the body in an enclosed box.

The entire human composting process typically takes several months. After the body is fully composted, family members can choose to take the soil home or have it returned to the earth by the funeral home.

## High environmental price tag for typical burial arrangements

Historically, most Americans have had the choice between two end-of-life options: casket burials and cremations.

But caskets can be expensive, and both options have detrimental environmental impacts, said Kristina Spade, founder and CEO of Recompose, which argued in support of the California bill.

The national median cost of an adult funeral with a viewing and burial is about $7,800, according to the National Funeral Directors Association—the casket itself averages $2,500. Average cremation prices hover around $7,000, the same price Recompose charges.

The greenhouse gas emissions of manufacturing and transporting one standard coffin and tombstone is equal to the carbon footprint of a car traveling nearly 2,500 miles, according to research by the city of Paris' funeral services in 2017. Cremation produces a carbon footprint equal to a car traveling almost 700 miles and releases pollutants into the air, like

nitrogen dioxide and mercury, the research found.

"Human composting avoids those harmful impacts and also, by sequestering carbon into the soil during the process, it has a positive benefit to the planet," Spade said. In total, about a metric ton of carbon is saved by choosing human composting over other options, she said.

## A shift toward eco-friendly burials

More people are moving away from typical burial methods, according to data from the National Funeral Directors Association. Cremation recently passed casket burials as the most popular option for final disposition: it was used in 57.5% of deaths in 2021, versus a 36.6% burial rate, the association said.

And a 2022 report from the association says over 60% of people would be interested in exploring "green" funeral options because of their potential environmental benefits, cost savings or for some other reason—a 5% increase from 2021. And over half of survey respondents said they've attended a funeral at a non-traditional location.

David Heckel, who helps families plan ahead for end-of-life arrangements at the Natural Funeral in Colorado, said most people who choose human composting do so for environmental stewardship.

"Most people who are coming to us who have had a death in their family, and are choosing this, are doing so because their lived values of environmentalism and care for the earth are important to them," Heckel said. "So they are choosing this as a way to give back to the earth and to be more environmentally earth friendly."

The funeral home has started over 30 composting processes since it became legal in Colorado a year ago, and Heckel said he's seen more and

more people interested in the option.

He compared the process, which takes several months, to a "long goodbye."

"It makes the transition to life without a loved one a little more gradual and maybe a little easier for some folks in that regard," Heckel said. "Because you know that there's something else to come still when the soil is ready, perhaps."

## A new method with traditional roots

While human composting may be morally aligned with environmentalists, the new method doesn't reflect everyone's values. The California Catholic Conference, which represents the Catholic church, opposed the California bill, denouncing it as an undignified way to treat the body.

The process, the conference wrote, "reduces the human body to simply a disposable commodity. The practice of respectfully burying the bodies or the honoring the ashes of the deceased comports with the virtually universal norm of reverence and care towards the deceased."

But despite being newly legalized, the concept of human composting is not new, and the practice of returning a body to the earth after death is a long-held tradition in many cultures.

Traditional Jewish law says a body should be returned to the earth as soon as possible. Embalming isn't allowed and the body is buried in a casket made fully of wood, with holes drilled in the bottom to quicken the decomposition process. And Buddhist Tibetans practice "sky burials," where a human corpse is placed on a mountaintop to decompose or be eaten by animals.

"Lots of people like the idea of returning to nature," said Jillian Tullis, a professor of communication at the University of San Diego who studies death and dying. "So in some ways, if you want to call something traditional, going back to the dirt—you don't get more traditional than that."

Over 1,000 people have signed up in advance to be composted when they die through Recompose, Spade said. The company plans to expand in California soon.

"I think for a lot of people, it struck a chord where it suddenly brought meaning back to the end of life and to the death care process," Spade said. "The idea of being able to grow a tree with the person that you love so much, the idea of being able to return to nature after you die and to somehow connect back to the natural ecosystem—that has a pull for people, and that is why we're seeing a rise in interest for new options."