

Washington poised to become first state to allow eco-friendly 'human composting'

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Washington is expected to become the first state to legalize an environmentally-friendly burial alternative that turns bodies into soil within weeks.

A bill allowing (<https://app.leg.wa.gov/billssummary?BillNumber=5001&Year=2019&Initiative=false>) "natural organic reduction," sometimes called "human composting," has passed the legislature and is headed to Democratic Gov. Jay Inslee's desk.

Inslee, who has staked his 2020 presidential campaign on climate change, is reviewing the bill. A spokeswoman for his office said the accelerated decomposition process "seems like a thoughtful effort to soften our footprint" on the planet.

Compared to burial, the bill's sponsor, Democratic Sen. Jamie Pedersen of Seattle, said the natural organic reduction process takes up less space. It could also reduce carbon emissions emitted by cremation.

Human composting creates an average of one cubic yard of soil per body, or enough to fill about two large wheelbarrows. If the bill passes, relatives could keep the soil in urns, plant a tree with it on private property or spread it on public lands. The laws applying to scattered cremated remains would also hold true for soil, Pedersen said.

Greener: [Life after solving climate change \(/story/news/nation/2019/04/22/heres-what-world-look-like-once-we-solve-climate-change/3400271002/\)](/story/news/nation/2019/04/22/heres-what-world-look-like-once-we-solve-climate-change/3400271002/)

Earth Day: [99.9999% chance humans are causing global warming \(/story/news/nation/2019/04/21/earth-day-2019-climate-change-humans-global-warming-weather-rising-water/3507125002/\)](/story/news/nation/2019/04/21/earth-day-2019-climate-change-humans-global-warming-weather-rising-water/3507125002/)

"It is sort of astonishing that you have this completely universal human experience — we're all going to die — and here's an area where technology has done nothing for us. We have the two means of disposing of human bodies that we've had for thousands of years, burying and burning," Pedersen said. "It just seems like an area that is ripe for having technology help give us some better options than we have used."

He got the idea from a constituent, who modeled the process on a method farmers use to dispose of livestock.



In this Friday, April 19, 2019, photo Katrina Spade, the founder and CEO of Recompose, displays a sample of the compost material left from the decomposition of a cow, using a combination of wood chips, alfalfa and straw, as she poses in a cemetery in Seattle. Washington is set to become the first state to allow the burial alternative known as "natural organic reduction," that turns a body into soil in a matter of weeks. (Photo: Elaine Thompson, AP)

After studying the process for her master's thesis, Katrina Spade ran a pilot project decomposing six human bodies last year at Washington State University. Converting the bodies to soil took between four and seven weeks, Spade said.

Her company, [Recompose](https://www.recompose.life/) (<https://www.recompose.life/>), plans to provide "natural organic reduction" services "to all who want them," but has not yet listed a price. The company previously told NBC News it aimed to charge \$5,500 per body. A traditional burial with a funeral viewing had a price tag of about \$7,360 in 2017, according to the National Funeral Directors Association.

Washington state's cremation rate is the highest in the nation, according to the Cremation Association of North America. More than 78 percent of those who died in the state in 2017 were cremated.

Rob Goff, executive director of the Washington State Funeral Directors Association, said his group has been getting questions about the new process, and Spade has spoken at meetings.

"To be able to provide more options for people's choices is a very exciting thing," he said.

Instead of replacing cremation or burial, Spade said she wants to offer a meaningful and sustainable alternative.

"Our goal is to provide something that is as aligned with the natural cycle as possible, but still realistic in being able to serve a good number of families and not take up as much land as burial will," she said.

The bill, which would take effect in May 2020, if signed, would also legalize alkaline hydrolysis. Already used in 19 states, the process turns bodies into liquid and bone in a pressurized machine with water, chemicals and heat.