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Why is Green Burial virtually impossible in Boulder County?

Green Burial Boulder County and Natural Transitions are raising awareness of what they call the “green gap.”

The City of Boulder, long a leader in green initiatives, recently became only the third city in the country to require recycling and composting citywide. Yet in terms of burial, it lags far behind so many other parts of the country, even areas that are close by. You only have to stray into nearby Fort Collins, in Larimer County to find cemeteries where you can choose to have a green burial. At present there are exactly *zero* green burial cemeteries listed for either the City or County of Boulder.

“It’s truly mystifying. It’s 2015, but I don’t have the option to be buried locally when I die in a way that makes any sense to me,” says Karen Van Vuuren, Executive Director of Natural Transitions, a non-profit dedicated to providing education on conscious, holistic, and green approaches to end of life, including family-directed home-based after-death care also known as “home funerals.” Natural Transitions, based in the City of Boulder, has for many years been supporting individual and non-profit initiatives who have tried to start green cemeteries, especially in Boulder County and Colorado as a whole.

Dan Ziskin, of Green Burial Boulder County adds “A lack of green burial is a huge gap particularly in the stated goals of the City of Boulder, which has zero waste and carbon reduction goals. Green burial is so common in Britain, it does not raise an eyebrow. Here in the States, as in Europe, there are clear rules and regs about running green cemeteries. Green cemeteries, and even hybrid cemeteries (where you can choose a section of a conventional cemetery in which green burial is allowed) are safe, and, of course, sustainable for the planet.”

Let’s take a quick look at the cost of conventional (non-green) burial here in Boulder County. According to estimates, this is what goes straight into the ground per year or up into the air in Boulder County:

- Enough concrete for about 90 average sized family homes (this goes to form the vault over a coffin—designed to maintain that even golf-course look).

- Enough trees to build about 5 average sized family homes (used in coffins). The wood used is usually exotic, such as mahogany, often imported great distances from unsustainable logging areas, such as the Amazon rainforest. The wood is commonly finished with toxic finishes.
- Enough formaldehyde to fill 5 bathtubs to the top (this is injected into corpses to provide a pink “lifelike” skin tone for open viewing).
- Cremation is not much better. Figures from California suggest that an astonishingly high 5% of carbon dioxide emissions are due to cremations. About 350,000 lbs of carbon dioxide are released into the atmosphere per year from cremations. That is equivalent to the carbon dioxide emissions from nearly 32 cars off the road/year in Boulder County.

Estimate Cost of conventional burial in Boulder County (2013)¹

From conventional internment:

476 gallons formalin

= roughly 5 average bathtubs to capacity or **10 bathtubs** filled for use²

1,693 tons concrete to form vaults (designed to allow for easier, more even mowing)³

= enough for **89 family homes**⁴

Almost 150,000 board feet of lumber, typically finished with toxic finishes⁵

= over 37 trees⁶

= about **5 typical family homes**⁷

From cremation

over 350,000 lbs CO2 released into the atmosphere⁸

¹ Numbers of deaths in Boulder County in 2013 (latest available year) = 1708. Data from CO Dept Public Health and Environment Data http://www.chd.dphe.state.co.us/cohid/topics.aspx?q=Death_Data%. This assumes that people who died in Boulder County are buried in Boulder County.

² Based on estimate that 1058 people were interred in 2013 in Boulder County if following the national average of 62%. Funeral Consumers Alliance of California <http://www.fcasocal.org/cremation.html> Embalming uses 3-6 gallons formalin / person (formaldehyde), calculated at 4.5 gallons/person

³ Assuming 1058 people x 1.6 tons per typical vault, <http://greenburialcouncil.org/home/what-is-green-burial/>

⁴ The average single family dwelling in 2000 uses 19 tons of concrete. http://css.snre.umich.edu/css_doc/CSS01-08.pdf

⁵ Exact figure of 148,120 board feet. Assuming 1,058 coffins (62% national burial rate) x 130-150 board feet lumber per coffin. <http://www.funeral-caskets.com/Wood-Caskets-information.php>

⁶ One tree can render about 3-5,000 board feet. <http://www.greenhomebuilding.com/QandA/saveforestsQandA.htm>

⁷ The average single family American home (2,190 square feet) can contain 14,200 board feet of lumber and up to 14,000 square feet of panel products. <http://sharplogger.vt.edu/virginiasfi/faq.html>

⁸ Based on national average cremation rate of 38% = 650 people estimated in Boulder County x 540lbs Co2 released per cremation/person Both sets of figures based on those provided by Funeral Consumers Alliance of California <http://www.fcasocal.org/cremation.html>

Per capita per year carbon emissions in Boulder County are 16.34 metric tons *Boulder County Trends 2013*, p 67 <https://www.commfound.org/files/trends/OurEnvironment.pdf>

That is equivalent to 159 metric tons (1 metric ton= 2,205 lbs)

= keeping almost 32 cars off the road/year in Boulder County.

= 18,200 gallons gas = amount to fill SUV gas tank 650 times over.⁹

If 116,000 metric tons of Co₂ is equivalent to taking 23,000 cars off the road per year, as stated in *Boulder County Trends 2013*, p 69, then 1 car on the road/year = 5 metric tons carbon.

⁹ This is based on estimated numbers of cremations in Boulder County in 2013 of 650 people. The typical cremation conducted in a modern crematory requires an average of 28 gallons of fuel (about the amount of fuel that can be held in an SUV gas tank).
<http://www.fcasocal.org/cremation.html>