



Posted on Fri, Nov. 27, 2009

Interest stirred by commercial-grade composting

By Sandy Bauers

Inquirer Staff Writer

WILMINGTON - For now, it's mostly just a flat expanse of asphalt and wood chips, swept by a chilly wind off the Delaware River.

But come Monday, trucks loaded with tons of vegetable scraps and bits of meat will begin rolling into what officials say is the largest food-waste composting facility on the East Coast.

Here at the 27-acre Wilmington Organic Recycling Center, about 500 tons of food and yard waste a day will be transformed - in a matter of weeks - into soil and mulch.

Officials say the \$20 million facility promises to spur already-rocketing interest in composting among supermarkets, restaurants, universities, hospitals, and others with large-scale food operations.

Once deemed the backyard bastion of latter-day hippies, food-waste composting has supersized into an industry.

One concern is that, since the industry is still in its infancy, facilities are few and far between. Food waste sometimes has to be transported long distances, with the fuel use and diesel emissions blunting the environmental benefits.

Proponents say that as the industry grows and facilities are built, transportation inefficiencies will lessen. And the effort helps businesses with high food usage approach one of sustainability's holy grails - zero waste - while fighting climate change, too.

Heightened interest in composting is spawning a variety of new companies.

One entrepreneur, Timothy Bennett of South Philadelphia, makes midnight runs in his truck to pick up food waste from 65 homes and businesses, then composts it in community gardens.

In February, Rocco D'Antonio started a New Jersey company, Organic Diversion, that designs collection systems for facilities and picks up the waste. Customers include the four hospitals

and an outpatient clinic owned by Virtua in Marlton.

Ned Foley, a labor lawyer, quit to start a commercial composting operation on his Two Particular Acres farm in Royersford, Montgomery County. Three years ago, he was begging for food scraps. Now, he is all but inundated with requests.

He thinks the new Wilmington plant will compel haulers to put together programs for diverting food waste. "The other thing is, frankly, he's a price-driver. He's going to set the standard," Foley said.

Estimates of the amount of food waste generated in the nation vary widely, but according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, about 25 percent of the prepared food in the nation is never eaten. In 2008, about 31 million tons of food waste was simply thrown away.

When it winds up in the oxygen-starved environment of a landfill, the food does not decompose. Instead, it putrefies and gives off methane, a greenhouse gas that is 21 times more potent than carbon dioxide.

The science of composting is fairly simple: Mix organic wastes in the proper proportion, add air and water, and nature takes over. Microbes reduce it to rich dirt that can be returned to the land, reducing the need for fertilizers.

Proponents say composting saves money, too.

Priscilla Hayes, a composting expert at Rutgers University, said that while landfill tipping rates vary, a rule of thumb is that it costs 25 percent less to compost food waste than to landfill it.

San Francisco recently provided a national example by requiring that all food waste - from homes and businesses - be composted. One study estimated 36 percent of the city waste stream was compostable. The law went into effect Oct. 21.

Historically, Philadelphia's food waste was "recycled" by pigs; farmers made regular treks to restaurants and other facilities to collect the refuse.

As time passed, most pig farms gave way to suburban houses, and the food was rerouted to the landfill.

Page: 1 of 3 [View All](#)

[1](#) | [2](#) | [3](#) | [Next»](#)

Find this article at:

http://www.philly.com/philly/news/20091127_Interest_stirred_by_commercial-grade_composting.html

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.

© Copyright | Philly Online, LLC. All Rights Reserved. Any copying, redistribution or retransmission of any of the contents of this service without the express written consent of Philly Online, LLC is expressly prohibited.