

# Delaware environment: Laying waste to wastefulness

## Composting center puts Delaware in forefront of food recycling

By JEFF MONTGOMERY • The News Journal • April 22, 2010

The plan is to feed it by the truckload: outdated groceries, restaurant leftovers, school and hospital cafeteria table scraps, castoffs from banana boats and produce markets.

All would pour into the maw of **Peninsula Composting's** new **Wilmington Organic Recycling Center** -- a commercial venture near the Port of Wilmington that industry officials are touting on Earth Day today as a national trailblazer in efforts to keep food waste out of landfills.

The formula is simple enough: old and unwanted food in, new and soil-enriching compost out. Dollops of carefully mixed-in brush, leaves and wood balance the process, making a complete meal for industrious bacteria that decompose chopped and blended wastes under blankets of high-tech, odor-controlling fabric from W.L. Gore.

Done right, the process can break down wastes in eight weeks, shaving as much as two years off Mother Nature's best recycling time.

Peninsula's owners hope to do it to the tune of 160,000 tons a year -- drawing in food waste from Delaware and nearby states and saving customers money on regular disposal **costs**. No other food composter in America currently does more.

"Wilmington is the cutting edge of the compost world today," said Al Rattie, manager of the U.S. Composting Council's product and testing standards program. "Food waste has been sort of our last frontier."

### Earth-saver, cost-saver

Delaware now throws into landfills all but 5,700 tons of the 107,000 tons of food waste it produces each year. State reports show that discarded food accounted for about 1 out of every 10 pounds of trash dumped in landfills in 2008.

Environmental groups and regulators see the landfilling as a costly waste of organic material that could renew and nourish soils. Instead, landfilled food produces liquid pollutants and methane, a gas that contributes to **global warming**.

Landfills have to capture and manage both liquids and methane gas emerging from their piles. The **expense** adds to disposal costs that will reach \$80 per ton for most Delaware haulers on July 1, when a scheduled 50 percent increase takes effect.

"I think the composting plant is a very good thing. This is one of the areas where we haven't been able to recycle anything, except for individuals who recycle lettuce and vegetables in their gardens," said Pat Todd, a League of Women Voters member who has served as a public member of recycling study groups and advisory panels.

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"The restaurants need something like this -- and it makes very good compost," Todd said.

Much of the raw material, which emerges as a loamy, soil-like product, is expected to come from bulk food waste collection agreements with stores, institutions and waste haulers in Delaware and surrounding states. The company plans to announce details today, although officials have said previously that grocery chains and the University of Pennsylvania are among those already lined up.

Scott Woods, Peninsula's chief executive officer, said after the plant opened that composting offers customers clear environmental and **financial** benefits.

"First and foremost, we're **reducing waste** disposal costs for waste generators and haulers," Woods said. "Second, we reduce their carbon footprint, because those organic wastes won't be generating landfill gas. And it saves nutrients that can be put back in the soil to help grow more organics."

### A revolutionary approach

The company started operating on a small scale in December, sending 2,000 tons through its sealed and filtered processing building in its first three weeks. Woods recently said that the material emerging from Peninsula's orderly rows of tarp-covered waste "looks and smells and feels a lot like the forest floor."

Although costs to customers will vary, Woods last estimated Peninsula's "gate rate" at a little more than \$50 per ton, far below DSWA's landfill fee.

Rattie said Peninsula's site, on a formerly vacant and idle industrial property along Christiana Avenue, is "ideal as far as their location and their ability to work with producers and collectors." The company's plant design is "really a significant improvement on the static pile system that's been around for 25 years," Rattie added.

Industry and government guides note that composters must control several basic characteristics of their piles, including particle size, moisture, temperature and oxygen flow, to keep naturally occurring bacteria and fungi happy and busily composting.

Delaware Solid Waste Authority officials devoted a full page of their new long-range plan to a case study of Peninsula's operation. The system, DSWA noted, borrows some techniques from a compost chopping and mixing method used by Nantucket, Mass., then assembles long, dune-like berms of the material under cover for a controlled and vastly accelerated breakdown.

Although much of Peninsula's supply will come from other states, some major northern Delaware haulers have signed on, saying they anticipate **savings** of 10 percent to 50 percent on landfilling costs.

Neighbors will be watching closely in the meantime.

### A good neighbor

Rep. Jim Johnson, D-New Castle, said he was initially skeptical of Peninsula's plan, and said that residents in nearby neighborhoods were concerned the **business** would bring more traffic and odors.

Time changed that view.

"The community has embraced it," Johnson said. "Not only has it been a good neighbor, but it's been beneficial to the community. It brought jobs."

Company officials said the operation will initially employ about 15 people.

Johnson said he talked with lawmakers from Seattle

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about the only comparable site in the country, Cedar Grove Composting. Cedar Grove is an unrelated business that has operated since 1989. Food waste accounts for a minority of its business.

"They seemed quite pleased," Johnson said.

Some Cedar Grove neighbors were less than pleased in mid-2008, however, when weather conditions, problems with raw materials and other troubles combined to cook up what news accounts described as a "foul stench."

The company said later that it spent about \$1 million on improvements.

Peninsula's Wilmington plan has recalled for some residents a troubled sludge composting and energy recovery operation in Wilmington from the late 1980s. Those businesses shut down after years of complaints and debate. Officials say the new operation has almost nothing in common with past projects.

"Sometimes you can smell something a little bit like wet leaves when it rains," said Lorraine Henry, who lives in Eden Park, just west of Peninsula. "But it's calmed down, and it's not bad."

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A bulldozer moves a pile of compost Wednesday at Peninsula Compost Company's Organic Recycling Center near the Port of Wilmington. (The News Journal/JENNIFER CORBETT)

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