

Burlington Free Press

My Turn: Compost: A solution, not a problem

By Pat O'Neill

November 7, 2007

When the Legislature passed Act 78 in 1987, the plan was to divert 50 percent of landfilled material by 2005. Yet in 2007, Vermont is still only at a 30 percent diversion level. By comparison, San Francisco's diversion rate is nearly 70 percent. Elsewhere, there are cities, provinces and entire countries where all compostable materials (sometimes called "organics" or "organic residuals") are banned from landfills. These materials are no longer considered "solid waste." They are resources: valued and managed like any other resource.

To their credit, the Agency of Natural Resources and the Agency of Agriculture recognize the benefits from composting and compost use. One glitch in achieving those benefits -- as recent press has made clear -- is that the regulatory path for composters is far from assured. Without regulatory change, Vermont cannot hope to meet even modest waste diversion goals -- or achieve significant environmental benefits from increasing the use of compost statewide.

The amount of organic residuals as a percentage of the total waste stream is also likely to grow in the foreseeable future. Manufacturers are scrambling to reduce their carbon footprint, and researchers are developing compostable pseudo-plastics (sometimes called biopolymers) made from renewable sources such as corn and potatoes to meet the demand for "greener" packaging. This means the amount of material that may end up in the compost bin could grow significantly over the next five to 10 years.

Organic residuals already represent the largest portion of landfilled material, and it is material that we can manage entirely within the state. There is money to be saved and made in diverting and composting. And there are significant environmental benefits to be

gained from using that compost.

For example, nonpoint source pollution represents 80 percent of the total phosphorus entering Lake Champlain (LCBP 2006), of which erosion and chemical fertilizers are significant contributors. Using compost to prevent erosion; increase soil stability and fertility; retain moisture; promote re-vegetation; and bind and filter nutrients, sediment and toxins is well documented.

The level of concern about environmental degradation is also well known. Polls consistently show that more than 80 percent of Americans are concerned about the environment. Nearly half (49 percent) of those polled in a recent survey (2007 GfK Roper Green Gauge) state that they would do more for the environment if they only knew how. It is not uncommon, either, for people to feel that their personal efforts won't make a difference, especially on large environmental problems, such as phosphorus in waterways and loss of topsoil. Using compost is something anyone can do to make a positive, immediate, environmental impact.

There was a time when the idea of a municipal solid-waste plan was a new idea. Perhaps it is time to consider town and regional nutrient management plans, as the state already requires from dairy farmers. True, new policy territory inevitably includes a measure of uncertainty, but European countries and Japan, in particular, are years ahead of us in the waste-to-resource conversion and offer models to learn from and build on.

The benefits -- the positive impact that making and using compost can have on the resources we hold dear: our lakes and streams, working farms, local food, environmentally healthy and economically vibrant communities -- are waiting to be reaped.

Advancing the use of compost through thoughtful resource and nutrient management policy, education and strategic infrastructure can help mitigate environmental problems such as urban and agricultural water pollution and erosion, along with removing an estimated 30 percent to 50 percent of currently landfilled material. Compost is one of the few undisputed win-win options for responding to these environmental issues and concerns that impact all

Vermonters, and the state's natural resource wealth.

An issue paper on the challenges and benefits to increase compost production and use in Vermont can be viewed and downloaded at www.compostingvermont.org.

Pat O'Neill of Westfield is program director for Composting Association of Vermont.