

COMPOSTING MATTERS

by Paul van der Werf

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Waste to Market

Envirem shows how the compost industry is maturing

The composting industry has been neither perspicacious nor precocious — stagnant nor rudderless. It has however overcome the friction of inertia.

Hunkered down at the recent Compost Council of Canada's "Composting Matters" workshop at Debert, Nova Scotia, I was struck by the irony of the place. A former air force base, it has struggled and has turned itself into a hotel and conference centre, without losing its military Spartan chic.

Composting has also turned from one thing into another. It has gone from cheering waste diversion to realizing that this is about product manufacturing — with the former just a sweet icing on the cake. It has moved

beyond the cusp of being a full-fledged industry and is now maturing and growing. There has been a shift from single facility operators to large multi-facility operators.

Envirem Technologies Inc. based in Fredericton, New Brunswick, is a company that neatly mirrors these changes. The company philosophy — "waste to market" — captures quite simply what composting should be about.

Started in 1994, its initial focus was on the bioremediation of contaminated soils. About three years later it turned its first windrow. It was successful in this regard, but as Bob Kiely, Envirem's general manager, states, the clients wanted it to be able to find a better end

use for the remediated product. Necessity equals invention. Voila! Composting and more importantly the production of compost became the platform for satisfying early clients and set the stage for future growth.

Kiely notes: "While Envirem's earliest production, and end-use, of compost was as an amendment to remediated soils, it led to the later development of composting of more premium feedstocks, and specifically for higher value markets."

In a burst of fresh air, Rod Fry, Envirem's senior engineer and business developer, starts speaking by saying: "We live off regulations." Well, there's a cup half full. As it turns out, someone else's regulation is their opportunity.

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Seemingly disparate events such as local opposition (and a change in regulations) to spreading of raw manure, the inability of a forestry company to find a site for a new landfill, and the banning of methyl bromide (used to stabilize peat moss) have been re-assembled into the opportunities that are driving this growing business.

Coupled with a figurative and literal bouillabaisse of wastes such as potatoes, fish and biosolids needing a home, plus the recognition that compost can be a retail substitute for peat (and can in fact be blended with peat as an “extender”) rounds out the opportunities. It has been full steam ahead.

These things take time

Today, Envirem has eight composting facili-



Compost Awareness Day” event hosted at the Anne of Green Gables park in PEI. Our Seafood Compost was used to enrich the gardens there.

ties (seven in New Brunswick and one in Nova Scotia). A total pad space of 600 acres is used to compost about 400,000 tonnes of industrial wastes per year. The company aims for 600,000 tonnes per year by 2007.

Sites are located in unique locations like the middle of forests (see photo) and at abandoned air fields. Most sites feature an earthen pad without a lot of additional improvement. This gives them the buffer zones they need. Envirem’s compost facilities are regionally based. They are designed to receive and compost locally generated wastes.

Fry continues that, “The key to composting is combining ample amounts of forestry residuals with high nutrient feedstocks.” These compost quite simply. Wastes are blended and formed in large windrows. An excavator is used to turn windrows. And staff doesn’t rush things. The wastes gets “18 months of TLC” prior to harvesting for sale (see photo). The composting process is monitored regularly to ensure that it’s proceeding

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through the composting process properly.

The key to their success is their commitment to the right knowledge. All employees are environmental engineers or environmental technologists. Envirem is committed to training. As Kiely states, "You need to be educated to know what you are doing."

What difference does it make?

Today the company generates about 50 per cent of its revenue from tip fees, with the remainder from product sales. This is starting to change and move in favour of products. Markets are approximately split equally



Compost facility near Fredericton, NB. This facility is predominantly utilized for composting and topsoil manufacturing.

between Atlantic Canada, Ontario and New England.

Envirem has entered both the bulk and bagged markets and is entering new levels of sophistication as it finds ways to market its products (see photo).

Quality drives sales. Fry cannot stress this enough.

"As a founding member of the Compost Quality Alliance," he says, "we believe the common goal of producers is to always ensure a new customer receives the compost quality that they require for the job."

"We, as an industry, have to stop forcing square pegs into round holes, and to make sure to match end-use markets to our achievable compost quality. This way, everyone wins!"

The company has recognized that marketing to a variety of sectors increases sales. Composts are marketed as retail peat substitutes, as a component of peat-based professional mixes, as a component of manufactured

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East River, Nova Scotia facility. This facility provides composting of Louisiana-Pacific fibre-sludge allowing the mill to operate without a landfill.



top-soils and as a mulch substitute. A less conventional product is a dehydrated compost. These products are used in a variety of applications including turf establishment and maintenance, general landscaping and gardening, erosion control, wetland construction and bioremediation and pollution prevention.

“As each new product market is identified and developed, one quickly observes the improvements to production and sales,” says Fry. “However, it is only in hindsight that we reflect upon the many net-positive gains to the environment including waste diversion, conservation of natural resources, protection of habitat, and the reduction in use of chemicals and pesticides that result.”

How soon is now?


When I ask Fry to see where the industry will be in ten years his answer is quite telling.

“The future we envision has compost playing a much bigger supporting role within the growing media and peat mix industry,” he says. “On a global scale, growing media demands are out-pacing peat production.”

What is most telling is that it talks about

adding value to an already valuable product. To use compost to replace or become a part of a more valuable product raises its value.

To attain the benefits of this added value Fry notes that, “Compost producers will have to step-up quality and production volumes, to manage the increased demand of this market segment.”

And what about Envirem? Fry concludes: “We are setting a sales target to reach a million tonnes per year; it’s a lofty goal, but one we believe is worth chasing.” 

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