

"The former glut of 40 waste disposal facilities has been reduced to just seven. Where there once were no composting facilities there are now 19."



The Power of the Ban

Nova Scotia's organics diversion system

The Province of Nova Scotia has a special place in my heart. My wife's family is from Truro. I have some good friends there and I also own a piece of property in Gaspereau beside vineyards that overlooks a beautiful river valley (which I like to call my "personal carbon off-set").

Another thing that makes this place so special is Nova Scotia's unfettered and substantive contribution to the management of organic wastes.

Like many jurisdictions, at one time or another Nova Scotia featured many waste disposal facilities (some good, but most not so good) including those that open-pit burned. I've seen the same story in places as diverse as Ireland and Caribbean, where realization has also emerged that this is not right and must be changed.

In 1998 Nova Scotia took a bold step and banned compostable waste from landfill. The ban was a part of the province's 1995 Solid Waste Resource Management Strategy (and was only one 13 disposal bans).

While the word "ban" is enough to get environmentally faint-of-heart and commercially vested hyperventilating, bans recognize a maxim that the only true way to change things is through a quantitative dictum of some sort.

A ban turns the switch to "off."

This approach gets certain climate change types worked up. If you ban it, they say, you can't collect greenhouse gas credits for diversion later on. The answer is simple: change the rule.

In some way a disposal ban is a progenitor to the Zero Waste schemes today, except that it's real and has teeth.

A ban does not pre-suppose that every piece of organic waste is kept out of landfill. It sets the bar high. In Nova Scotia's case, the ban clearly articulated where the province wanted to go: improve waste management; divert more from landfill; stop calling it waste if it isn't; and, create green jobs.

Barry Friesen, now the General Manager for CleanFARMS™ (see article, page 15) worked as a waste resource manager for Nova Scotia at the time of the ban and had a hand in shaping the province's program.

"It seemed clear to us that the only way to achieve the national goal of 50 per cent solid waste diversion was for each province to address organics," Friesen says.

This seems pretty obvious today but at the time I think our heads were in the qualitative glow of waste diversion and we really hadn't added up how we were going to meet these aggressive goals.

"Recycling wasn't enough," Friesen says. "Studies conducted in Nova Scotia in the early 1990s proved this to be true."

"The challenge was that diverting organics was going to be more costly than the older style of open burning and landfilling of the past. Bans were therefore introduced as a way of ensuring the diversion of paper fibre, steel, aluminum, glass and organics from disposal."

The need for change and its realization means revolution on some level. A ban is a revolution. This type of change also means higher cost.



COMPOSTING MATTERS

Just as money can be used as a motivator, the higher costs of change releases our hard-wired aversion to spending more than we absolutely have to. This is fine on many levels but sometimes we don't pay the "right cost" — just what we choose that something should cost today.

The City of Lunenburg claims to have launched the first curbside composting program in the Americas. The province took a unique approach, again related to something very quantitative, and that was jobs. Without coming right out and saying so, they took a "triple bottom line" approach to dealing with waste.

Nova Scotia's new thinking of waste as a resource, something not to just check away, had a far-reaching effect that most of us probably don't appreciate.

"In Nova Scotia and across the Atlantic, creating sustainable jobs are seen as paramount in almost every initiative," says Friesen. "The Atlantic Region had long suffered from a 'brain drain' and was derided by those in larger provinces for receiving federal 'equalization' payments."

"Yet the Region realized that exploiting resources without full life-cycle management can have devastating results. The collapse of some fisheries, the closure of mines and the cost of managing many environmental problems left by older industries loomed large."

Results

Nova Scotia's current waste diversion rate is about 68 per cent — far higher than other provinces, and not to mention the lowest per-person waste disposal rate in Canada. The former glut of 40 waste disposal facilities has been reduced to just seven. Where there once were no composting facilities there now are 19. That's a pretty convincing turn-around!

And what about the future organic waste diversion?

"Nova Scotia has a robust diversion system that the rest of Canada can learn from," says Friesen. "More technologies and best practices are spreading across the country. It's important that the organics industry continue to band together to showcase the best technologies and the best practices to ensure its continued success."

Nova Scotia has forged much of the trail for composting. Others have followed. It's said that no place in the province is more than 70 km away from the ocean. I'd hazard the same could be said for composting facilities. ♻️

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