

by Paul van der Werf

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New Standards and Guidelines

Thoughts on Ontario's new compost rules



It was not with mixed emotions that I received my copies of the Ontario Ministry of the Environment's new composting standards and guideline.

Now I know it seems odd to get excited over some rather mundane and technical text, but the finished document represented the final chapter of 20 years of composting evolution in the province.

About as old as Abraham but with diminished wisdom, the *Interim Guidelines* for the Production of Aerobic Compost came into being in 1991 when the composting industry was in its infancy in Canada. I remember those days well. Maybe it was the vagaries of youth but there was palpable excitement that composting was a positive solution that could deliver significant results.

It's obviously not the standards and guidelines that make composting happen; it's the people, and their energy (and their significant investments) that has taken the organic waste processing industry from what was then mostly windrow composting facilities sprouting up, to the sophisticated in-vessel facilities with smoke (steam really) stacks that we see today.

The key changes are found in the Ontario compost quality standards document.

There are now three categories of compost quality: AA, A and B. The AA compost is essentially the same as the previous unrestricted use compost. As with that compost, it can contain no sewage biosolids. This was implicit in the *Interim Guidelines* because most Ontario sewage biosolids could not meet feedstock-allowable metal concentrations, which were the same as the final product-allowable metal concentrations. This is explicitly stated in the new standards.

The Category A and B compost designations are similar to the CCME Category A compost. It opens up the door to the composting of sewage biosolids by relaxing the concentrations for metal in feedstock.

Other notable changes from the *Interim Guidelines* include: a minimum curing period of 21 days; stronger requirements for proof of pathogen reduction for all wastes except leaf-and-yard waste (i.e., time, temperature and pathogen testing); more stringent foreign matter requirements; and, more detailed labeling requirements.

The standards essentially bring Ontario in line with the CCME Guidelines for Compost Quality with some Ontario-specific tweaks, including the aforementioned AA super compost.

The *Guideline for the Production of Compost in Ontario* was designed to provide guidance for a number of stakeholders: those seeking entrance to the composting industry, those already in it, and environment ministry staff (from approvals personnel to abatement officers). It's expected that the ministry will incorporate parts of these guidelines into environmental compliance approvals and use them as a tool when inspecting composting facilities.

Overall the industry appears pleased with the arrival of the *Interim Guidelines* and the standards. Existing facilities can immediately take advantage of the new compost categories, but they will need to ensure that the new metal concentrations, feedstock quality and pathogen requirements are met.

There is some general nervousness about being able to achieve the new foreign matter and maturity requirements, mostly because they were overly


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broad and loose in the *Interim Guidelines* but are now much more prescriptive. There's some breathing room for the industry, however, as the foreign matter and maturity requirements in current ECAs will stay in place until July 1, 2015, at which time the new standards will apply.

While the new standards and guidelines took a long time to arrive, the process has served a useful purpose. It has allowed various stakeholders to meet and create a consensus. The Association of Municipalities of Ontario (AMO), the Composting Council of Canada (CCC), the Municipal Waste Association (MWA), the Ontario Waste Management Association (OWMA) and the Regional Public Works Commissioners of Ontario (RPWCO) were invited by the ministry to provide detailed comments on these documents prior to their release.

In the intervening years, Ontario's (and Canada's) composting indus-

try has grown with great strides. Ontario has the most capacity, by far, of SSO and leaf-and-yard waste composting capacity in the country. In 1998, just over 500,000 tonnes/year of was treated; today, it's about 1.2 million tonnes.

Standards and guidelines do not necessarily stimulate new investment in infrastructure. They provide a framework and the "rules of engagement." They send a signal that large-scale composting is a viable method of dealing with a significant part of the waste stream. The next step is to broaden this framework and develop standards and guidelines for anaerobic digestion. 

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