

"If salt content is the best they can come up with, in a reliable fashion or otherwise, they haven't found very much."



The Green Bin Controversy

Not a wasted effort

Recently after spending a long week in Kananaskis, Country Alberta helping with the development of a new region-wide recycling system I found myself back in London at our annual Sunfest musical festival. At the behest of my wife I volunteered on behalf of TD Friends of the Environment at an Ecostation and spent the evening basically doing what I do all week — making sure people put the right thing in the right garbage can.

It was pretty impressive to see how far festivals have come. From the gory days of the polystyrene container black hole to compost-friendly

paper plates and food containers and cutlery made out of compostable plastics. Festival goers were for the most part pretty impressed. It's heartening to see firsthand that the diversion of organic waste has made such inroads. It feeds into what many people want to do — which is the "right thing."

Despite people's goodwill, we're running the risk of turning people against composting. A recent series of *Toronto Star* articles ("Green Bins: A Wasted Effort," July 4, 2009) on Toronto's green bin program have certainly brought the issue to a head in that city. The timing, to coincide in the middle of a strike that has seen garbage collection halted, is no coincidence.

The *Star* articles present a muddled and distorted assessment of the city's green bin program, suggesting that green bin wastes are either landfilled, incinerated or killing plants. That's certainly how the average person would read it, so cloistered are these articles in their negativity. It creates the story that green bin wastes are not composted. It's the kind of urban myth that can take on a life of its own and spread very quickly and far beyond Toronto. It creates an unnecessary cynicism in a population that doesn't want to be cynical about these things.

Canada's largest city, admired but mostly disparaged in the rest of the country, launched its green bin program in 2002. It's easily Canada's largest such program with over 500,000 households serviced with another 500,000 multi-residential households on deck. The service caters to a fairly broad definition of organic wastes, including such items as diapers and pet wastes. For ease, it allows its residents to use non-degradable plastic bags in kitchen containers and green bins.

In terms of allowing plastic bags, Toronto's approach is similar to that of Edmonton. Edmonton has a dedicated waste stream that it sends to its composting facility and whose system includes significant up front processing to remove non-compostable waste. It's also not dissimilar to Moncton's composting program, where residents sort organic wastes into a "wet" stream they put in a plastic bag before placement at the curb. Toronto has a narrower set of allowable feedstocks that are, save for the plastic bags, entirely (or at the very least partially) compostable.

The key challenge Toronto has faced has nothing to do with plastic bags, diapers, kitty litter, salt or unpromulgated composting guidelines. No, Toronto's biggest challenge has been to match the success of its collection program with its processing capacity. Aspects of this have been discussed in a previous column ("The Capacity to Succeed," February/March 2007 edition) and more recently in an article entitled "The State of Composting in Ontario" (visit www.2cg.ca/articles.html).

Toronto has been searching for processing capacity and trying to develop enough. Every composting facility has what I like to call a "carrying capacity" — this is the tonnage of organic waste it can receive and compost in a "nuisance free" manner. What has happened in some cases is that compost facilities were ill equipped to handle and process the amount of this type of waste they received. Although this is cold



Norseman's
Green Bin Plus


comfort for residents impacted by composting facilities, Toronto has plans underway to construct two large facilities of its own, patterned after an updated version of their successful Dufferin Organics Processing Facility. It will be designed to handle two-thirds of Toronto's green bin waste. The first of these two facilities is set to open in the spring of 2011.

The *Star* articles imply that compost derived from green bin is toxic to plants. A high and incorrectly reported sodium content was the biggest criticism of Toronto's green bin compost. Quite frankly, if salt content is the best they can come up with, in a reliable fashion or otherwise, they haven't found very

much. Sodium is not a regulated parameter and it's established industry practice to inform users to dilute their composts liberally. Parameters such as metals, maturity and pathogens are far more important indicators of compost quality. The "garbage" that goes into the composting process ends up coming out as compost.

The mainstream media, including the newspapers many of us read avidly, will from time to time build a story by shining the darkest light they can find on disparate events and occurrences and knitting them together to form some gloomy critical mass that's then used to try and define an issue. There's a real

danger in this, particularly when our own industry's words are taken and twisted into the story so we essentially end up condemning ourselves.

As I finish this column I find myself in Kananaskis Country once again, on my way to Highwood/Cataract, passing by Lemon Mine in a *Travels with Charley* kind of reverie. It occurs to me that we need to write the proper and true story ourselves — before someone again writes it for us. 

Paul van der Werf is president of 2cg Inc. in London, Ontario.

Contact Paul at www.2cg.ca

ENVIRONMENTAL COMPLIANCE CONFERENCE



Thursday, November 5, 2009
Lambton Golf and Country Club, Toronto, ON
(10 minutes from Pearson Airport)

To Register or for more Information,
Phone: 416-510-6867
Email: ecologevents@ecolog.com
Web: www.ecologevents.com/ecc

Sponsors:






The conference will focus on two environmental issues in Ontario: the proposed amendments to **Ontario Brownfield Regulation 153/04**; and **Extended Producer Responsibility** and **Zero Waste** initiatives under **Ontario's Waste Diversion Act**. There will also be a round table on the **Green Energy Act** and its application to waste facilities and brownfield sites.

One full-day, two simultaneous tracks followed by a round table.
Early Bird Registration is \$459.00 before October 1, 2009. SAVE \$100!

Registration includes meals.