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Local Self Reliance: Municipal Composting

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By the MOTHER EARTH NEWS editors



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Residents of Altoona, PA knew to separate organic waste from dry waste so the city could feed it into the municipal composting program.

PHOTO: FOTOLIA/PATRYSSIA

For the past several years, the good folks at the Institute for Local Self-Reliance in Washington, D.C. have worked to help urban residents gain greater control over their lives through the use of low-technology, decentralist tools and concepts. We strongly believe that more people (city dwellers and country folk alike) should be exposed to the Institute's admirable efforts.

Altoona, Pennsylvania isn't the kind of city that brings to mind visions of an ecological utopia . . . but for the past 27 years this industrial city in the Allegheny Mountains has been quietly running a municipal composting system. The process not only turns a good portion of Altoona's organic waste into a valuable, environmentally sound product, but also conserves a number of resources that are in short supply ... including soil, energy, and landfill space.

Voluntary Compliance

Almost any city in the country *could* follow Altoona's example. Unfortunately, few towns even *consider* such action. Instead, most communities burn, dump, and landfill almost 100 million tons of potential soil builder each year . . . at a cost of \$3.5 billion (which doesn't even include the environmental cost of polluted water and air).

And, although it's not an *absolute* success, the Altoona project does work. The city pays the cost of collecting the 25-50 tons of organics which 18,000 of its households voluntarily separate from their other throw-aways each day. Once it's sorted and decomposed, this material produces between six and ten tons of useful compost.

Recently, a private contractor (Fairfield Engineering, Inc.) began to process the waste with the aim of selling the end product ... mostly to farmers and gardeners within 300 miles of the city. The company also hopes, by using new machinery and markets, to *expand* the Altoona operation and start new projects in other cities as well.

Wasteful Indifference

Municipal composting's biggest problems, however, have little to do with the technology of producing the material, or even with finding suitable commercial outlets for the organic matter. The real difficulty lies in the fact that — *before* such a practice can become widespread — social attitudes toward garbage have to change.

Traditionally, planners who are responsible for the management of solid waste have used the "quick fix" method of solving disposal dilemmas. The "quick fix" attitude, however, simply reflects the popular thinking that garbage is something to be thrown away, rather than material that should be treated as a resource. The truth is that while landfills may be less expensive in the short run than composting projects, recycling the unwanted matter ultimately makes more sense.

Unfortunately, government programs often are very shortsighted. Most federal spending not only discourages garbage recycling programs, but actually supports projects that compete with such programs. The U.S. Department of Energy, for example, provides \$300 million in price supports, loan guarantees, and market development to high-technology processes for burning garbage. Although more energy could be saved — at far less cost — by recycling waste instead of burning it, programs like municipal composting receive no DOE funds. Therefore, cities like Altoona are forced to go it alone . . . and some are starting to do just that.

In Portland, Oregon subscribers to a private collection service are required to separate their wastes into organics, newspapers, glass, and cans. As a result, participating households have cut the amount of garbage they send to a local landfill by more than half. And because landfills of mixed organic and inorganic refuse need a daily earth cover to reduce pests and odors, removal of just the organic material can lengthen a landfill's life by 10-30% . . . and making use of both the organics and recyclable materials could extend a fill area's usefulness by as much as 80%.

An Energy Saver

In addition — and this is of prime importance today — municipal composting can save energy in several ways. First, substituting recycled or reused materials for virgin resources consumes less energy. Then,

separating organics from other waste also increases the nonorganic matter's usable energy, since — when mixed wastes are burned in energy recovery plants — the high moisture content of organics *lowers* the material's fuel value.

People who would like a municipal composting program for their communities should urge local officials to read *An Examination of Composting Alternatives to Landfilling of Organic Wastes*, prepared by Cloudburst Environmental Institute of Oregon. This report gives a good idea of how much such a project will cost, the amount of land that's needed, firms that manufacture composting equipment, and how much landfill space and energy can be saved.