



DIVERTING COMPOSTABLE ORGANICS

INTRODUCTION

Compostable organics are materials such as grass clippings, yard waste, food scraps, paper, textiles, wood, and even sewage sludge. Some compost can be managed in a residential backyard composter, while other materials require commercial facilities.

Managed properly, compostable organics can be a renewable resource and an effective means of waste reduction. Despite these potential benefits, approximately 800 thousand tonnes of organics are sent to BC landfills during an average year. Organics make up approximately 43 percent of solid waste in Metro Vancouver, meaning that we could potentially divert 478 thousand tonnes of organic material annually in the Lower Mainland alone.

CURRENT STATUS

BC does not have a province-wide strategy for compostable organics. Policies for managing these materials, if they exist at all, are set at the municipal or regional district level. The result is a patchwork of organics management practices throughout the province. In some cases, as in the City of Vancouver, yard trimmings are collected and centrally composted. In other jurisdictions there is no collection at all. And while residents may be encouraged to practice backyard composting in some areas, those who reside in multiple-family dwellings likely have no access to that alternative, thus adding hundreds of thousands of tonnes to a provincial solid waste stream that totaled 2,521,568 tonnes in 2006.

By contrast, Nova Scotia has had provincial legislation banning organics from landfills since 1998. Through its provincial regulatory leadership, Nova Scotia municipalities not only promote backyard composting but they also provide curbside organics collection to more than 76 percent of residents province-wide. Hundreds of jobs have been created as their organics diversion rate of 46 percent has turned a common waste into an economic resource.

Other jurisdictions are following suit. In 2002 Toronto started a pilot project called The Green Bin Program. Today over 510,000 homes in the Greater Toronto Area receive curbside organics collection. Each household now diverts 200kg of waste annually and keeps almost 1,500 garbage trucks bound for Michigan landfills off the road.

COMPOSTING INSTEAD OF LANDFILLING

What's wrong with putting organics into landfills? Landfilled organic waste— especially food waste – contributes directly to global warming as the methane generated by rotting organics in landfills is a greenhouse gas 21 times more potent than CO₂ (i.e. vehicle exhaust). As well, the moist content of organics contributes greatly to the creation of leachate, a management problem for landfills and a threat to ground and surface water quality.

COMPOSTING INSTEAD OF GARBAGE TREATMENT

Organic kitchen waste poses a problem in the liquid waste stream as well. Food waste flushed down garbage disposals wastes water and adds problem materials such as suspended solids, oils and grease to wastewater treatment plants. It also increases levels of Biochemical Oxygen Demand (BOD), and Chemical Oxygen Demand (COD), using up the available oxygen in water, resulting in oxygen levels that are too low to support aquatic life.

BENEFITS OF AN ORGANICS PROGRAM

An established municipal compost program can have many benefits. By reducing the amount of solid waste that ends up in the landfill it can make a significant impact on ground and air pollution. Removing 40% of materials from the solid waste stream can also almost double the landfill capacity. A site that has only 25 years of capacity under current policies could be utilized for 50 years or more. The finished compost is a nutrient-rich soil amendment that can improve soil structure, aeration and water retention. Rather than waste, composted organics are a valuable resource that returns nutrients to the earth.

WHAT YOU CAN DO ABOUT ORGANICS:

On average, each British Columbian generates over 600 kilograms of waste annually. By diverting organics each of us has the opportunity to remove approximately 200 kilograms from the solid waste stream every year.

Composting is one of the methods that individuals can use to make a difference. If you have a yard, start a composting system for grass and yards trimmings, as well as organic kitchen waste. Those who live in multiple-family dwellings can initiate a group system for collecting organics or set up small composters on their balconies. Even offices can divert organics with specialized systems such as worm bins to collect peelings, coffee grounds and scraps.

Individuals can also influence how their communities manage waste. You can write to municipal staff and elected officials in your area and voice your concerns regarding organics management. You can also join with others to share information and put forward a strong, united position on issues. Consumers, retailers, environmentalists, governments, producers and recyclers are all represented and have a voice within RCBC. Since its inception more than 30 years ago, the Council has worked to address our complex environmental issues by working together with all parties. By providing the diverse groups concerned with waste reduction issues with a constructive and cooperative forum for discussion, RCBC helps develop solutions for tomorrow that make sense today.

The best way to ensure you keep up with the latest developments in organics diversion and have your voice heard is to join RCBC. By doing so, you will receive the latest RCBC publications that explore this and other issues. As an RCBC member you become part of the made-in-B.C. solution that fits our collective waste reduction objectives and serves as a model for others to follow.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Ministry of Environment: <http://www.env.gov.bc.ca/epd/recycling/>

RCBC: www.rcbc.bc.ca

City Farmer: <http://cityfarmer.org/>

Metro Vancouver Composting: <http://www.metrovancouver.org/services/solidwaste/composting>

OR CALL

RCBC Hotline at 604-732-9253 or 1-800-667-4321

This document was developed with the assistance of RCBC members representing consumers, industry, government and environmental perspectives.

RCBC Mission Statement

RCBC is a multi-sectoral non-profit organization promoting the principles of Zero Waste through information services, the exchange of ideas and research.

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