

"Composting could help address a part of the 3 to 4 per cent of greenhouse gases estimated to be generated through waste management, but not much more."



Why Compost?

Over the years many good reasons to compost have been paraded about. These have included saving landfill space, waste diversion, replacing organic matter in the soil and the positive impacts of reducing greenhouse gas emissions. While many of these reasons may in some way be true, they may be largely irrelevant as to why we compost.

As I often tell my students, composting is product manufacturing first and foremost. Organic waste is the raw product and capitalism dictates that the product is made (with value added if possible) and then sold for the highest return. That is the only reason why any of us should be composting. All the other reasons are ancillary. It may not be the most lucrative business in the world (or maybe it just takes a long time to become lucrative) but, as they say, it's a living.

In Canada the strong have survived, with a Darwinian flourish, because they "get this" and have built their business models accordingly. The other reasons noted above are either not real reasons or require a leap of faith by policymakers. As evidenced by the paucity of financial and other incentivized support provided to the composting industry they have, for the most part, just not recognized these reasons as important enough.

As we desquester our remaining fossil fuels and head towards their extinction does composting truly offer us a chance to resequenter and somehow help stem the tide of greenhouse gas generation? Is it the Holy Grail reason that policymakers need to say composting is an important element in solving our environmental problems?

The greenhouse gas avoidance trigger is in our face and the management of organic wastes has entered the fray. While I might not agree with all the predicted outcomes I do believe that we consume far too

much (of all our resources). What is more problematic is the dogma associated with the Kyoto movement. It has moved far beyond helping the planet or climate. When our consumption and its outcomes are coupled with attendant social engineering and wealth redistribution (aspects that are so clear in the Liberals Green Shift policy) we lose sight of the real issues.

Climate report

Organic waste has entered the fray as a partner in the generation of energy, killing two carbon birds with one stone. I recently came across an interesting 2008 report called "Stop Trashing the Climate" (www.stoptrashingthecolimate.org). Its central premise is that waste management plays a far greater role in greenhouse gas emissions than we have previously acknowledged. In Canada the number that gets discussed is that about four per cent. This number is largely built on the impact of wastes in landfills.

The report's authors (from Eco-cycle, the Institute for Self Reliance and GAIA) estimate that in fact about 37 per cent of greenhouse gas emissions come from "wasting". This moves beyond waste management and moves up the chain to account for the greenhouse gas emissions that come from the resource extraction, transportation and manufacturing to re-create the products we've just thrown away.

In the limited sense of waste management's impact, the report state that landfills are the largest source of anthropogenic methane emissions in the United States. Methane, over a 100 year span, is 21 times more potent as a GhG than CO₂. Brenda Platt, from the Institute of Self Reliance in Washington, DC (and one of the key authors) states that, "methane is a fairly short lived greenhouse gas with a residence time of 12-13 years



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Compost is product manufacturing whether low tech or high tech processes are used.

in the atmosphere and as a result the true impacts get diluted." Using a 20 year horizon the potency of methane is 72 times more potent than carbon dioxide. This calculation is used to drive the urgency to keep organic wastes out of landfill.

The report recommends cessation of the practice of landfilling and incinerating biodegradable materials. In addition to avoiding methane generation from landfills, other benefits such as carbon sequestration are important. The report states that, "composting is thus vital to restoring the climate and our soils."

Platt writes that, "Composting of wastes can be done at local facilities that manage local wastes and sell their product locally. There is no shipping to Asia required.

"You can't capture all methane in a landfill; it is really an end of pipe technology. Composting is really important because it is the low-hanging fruit. It can be implemented on a wide scale relatively easily." The key in all

this, she says, are "the opportunities to reduce methane being generated from the landfill."

To effect meaningful change and policy making she says you "have to sell them on the low hanging fruit. Composting is a well developed technology that operates well with well trained operators." She concludes that it "needs permitting streamlined for success."

While in many ways I could not agree more there seems to be a pretty significant disconnect between their "composting should be front and centre in a national strategy to protect the climate in the short term" to help address their estimated 37 per cent of greenhouse gas emissions that come from wasting. Composting can help reduce the greenhouse generation in landfills, perhaps avoid the use of some fertilizers, and be sequestered in the ground. Composting could help address a part of the 3 to 4 per cent of greenhouse gases estimated to be generated through waste management, but not much more.

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From a Compost Value Day.

Is a potential 3 to 4 per cent reduction in greenhouse gas emissions enough for policymakers to make composting truly part of the solution? Maybe. For composting this will largely depend on driving this solution into the capitalist fold, that is, the ability to monetize greenhouse gas credits. Between policymakers

regulating away these opportunities and no real place to sell them, such credits are not a foregone certainty. Although this always expected to change soon, so far it has not.

For now I wouldn't hold my breath. Use organic waste as a feedstock to make high quality products that people want to buy. And

don't worry about the other reasons. They may just be hot air. ♻️

Paul van der Werf is president of 2cg Inc. in London, Ontario. Contact Paul at www.2cg.ca



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