

"Applying compost to agricultural land is a lot like applying manure, except the compost facility replaces the cow's stomach."



Let's Make a Deal!

Marketing compost into the agricultural sector



The Canadian composting industry has done very well marketing its high quality compost to the homeowner and horticultural market, but not as well with the agricultural sector, despite the kind of interconnectivity we have these days with the Internet.

In Canada about 2.5 million tonnes of organics are diverted annually. The country boasts about 70 million hectares of farmland; if each hectare received a modest application of a tonne of compost — well, the math is pretty easy. So the capacity for compost is there, but the market draw is not.

It's not for lack of trying. I felt déjà vu when I recently learned of a new round of compost-agricultural trials taking place in Ontario, where some compost producers are working with the provincial government and a university to develop trials. This longer-term study starts next year, and look at the application of source-separated organics (SSO) and compare it with fertilizer-only and fertilizer/compost treatments.

This has happened before.

The National Agricultural Compost Trials (NACT) designed by Environment Canada was carried out by Agri-Food Canada (AAFC) at their research stations across the country. NACT's purpose was to assess the benefits of compost application to agricultural soils using compost whose feedstocks were municipal and industrial source-separated wastes.

It found (as have many other studies) that such compost can be beneficially used on agricultural land. What has never been properly

developed is the value proposition that goes along with it: it's one thing for a product to be beneficial; it's another matter for someone to actually want to buy it.

This new round of compost trials will undoubtedly show that compost can be beneficially used on agricultural land. What's needed to convert past and future results into sustained compost sales? Let's consider possible solutions.

Engineers are not Marketers: Greg Patterson, President and Owner of London, Ontario's A&L Laboratories, has a longstanding track record at the forefront of defining the qualities of compost in Canada. A&L was instrumental in helping the Composting Council of Canada (CCC) develop its Compost Quality Alliance (CQA) (www.compost.org/CQA-En.html).

"Composters have not figured out how to market their compost to farmers," says Patterson. "They're trying to market compost with the same quality as would be marketed to the horticultural sector." With tongue in cheek he adds that "engineers are not marketers," the point being that the people who design or operate compost facilities should stick to that and leave marketing to marketing pros.

Show and Tell: Ontario's Peel Region and Peel Soil and Crop Improvement Association recently held a very successful open day with the agricultural community to showcase their SSO compost. It included educational sessions and tours that brought together 110 compost producers and farmers.

ORGANIC MATTERS

Michael Payne — until recently an Environmental Specialist with the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Affairs (OMAFRA) and now with Black Lake Environmental — says, “As with most of us, farmers are visual learners and believers. They want to see compost’s value in the field through side-by-side demonstration trials comparing compost use with ‘normal’ farm practices, with farmers whom they know and trust.”

That’s the approach being taken by Stoney Creek’s Ontario’s Aim Environmental Group (and other Ontario compost producers) who manage composting operations at the City of Hamilton’s Centralized Composting Facility. (See *Cover Story*, page 8.)

“We work hard to actively engage the farming community and to clarify and thoroughly explain the benefits of compost to them,” says Justin Lim, Aim’s Marketing and Communications specialist.

“We’re working with the OMAFRA to use compost on agricultural plots,” he says. “We’re testing compost usage against fertilizers and other amendments.”

As well, Aim has taken a page from the crop seed companies whose signage with seed information stands proudly at the edge of farmer’s harvest-ready fields; Aim places signs on fields that use its compost.

Keep it simple: The composting industry needs to work towards not just selling the product but getting it onto the fields.

“Farmers are very busy people,” says Payne. “If getting this material applied to the field is not simple or it does not fit into their crop management program, then they’re less likely to use it.”

“Compost is best suited for a cash crop operation (as opposed to a livestock operation),” Payne says. “Typically these operations don’t have equipment capable of spreading the compost. The supplier may need to address this through equipment rental, custom application, and lower cost to those with equipment.”

Sell the right product: Farmers don’t need compost of the same quality as household and horticultural markets.

“There’s no such thing as bad compost, provided it meets environmental requirements,” says Patterson. “The composting industry has been trying to sell compost whose quality is too high for a price the farmer won’t pay. If you get \$5/tonne for compost you’re doing well.”

The CQA clearly lays out broader ranges for parameters such as soluble salts, sodium and carbon to nitrogen ratio for composts that could be used agriculturally (i.e., soil amendment). Similarly, compost applied to farmland doesn’t need to have the same maturity level as that sold into the household and horticultural market. In some ways, applying compost to agricultural land is a lot like applying manure, except the

compost facility replaces the cow’s stomach.

“The real benefits of compost are organic matter, humates and its disease suppressive potential,” continues Patterson. The challenge is that it’s difficult to quantify a monetary value for these attributes.

Work with the fertilizer industry: Compost will not replace fertilizer; this should be a tenet. Nutrients are easy to develop a value proposition around because farmers buy them. While perhaps counter-intuitive, basing compost’s value proposition on nutrients creates an unnecessary enemy of the fertilizer industry.

“You don’t want to alienate the fertilizer industry,” says Patterson. Farmers maintain close relationships with the fertilizer industry, which has much more clout and deeper pockets than the composting industry.

“They can be your biggest marketing arm,” Patterson says.

It would be wise for the industry to work directly with the fertilizer industry to distribute their products to the farmer rather than try to compete with them. A great example of this is N-Viro, a company that markets its lime-stabilized biosolids through fertilizer distributors.

Solve problems: Successful products solve problems. For compost to be successful one needs to be able to sell farmers something they need but are not already buying. This again speaks to the need to develop metrics to incorporate organic matter, humates and disease suppression into a value proposition.

There are other problems. For instance glyphosate is used widely as a broad-spectrum herbicide to kill annual broadleaf weeds and grasses. It’s been suggested that its regular use can impact crops grown on those soils.

“It essentially gives plants a kind of plant AIDS,” says Patterson. “It has a profound impact on the plant immune systems, rendering them susceptible to disease organisms that might be in the soil.”

Anecdotal evidence has suggests that compost can reverse this impact in soil. Further research is needed to prove this.

The process to gain the trust of the agricultural community is clearly a long-term one. Ultimately a new cogent and supportable value proposition needs to be created that spells out, in monetary terms, compost’s main benefits including organic matter, humates and disease suppressive capabilities, as well as problems that it can potentially help solve. An evidence-supported explanation to the agricultural community will transform compost from being merely a beneficial product into something they would actually like to buy. ♻️

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