

Composting in Indiana— Opportunity Knocks

Indiana, like many other states, is feeling the pressure created by the need to cut costs, as well as demands placed on existing programs to recycle more, landfill less, and “go green.” The discussion here in the Hoosier State was most evident in the late summer/early fall of 2014. The legislative summer study committee directed to study the challenge of “how to increase recycling” held hearings to gather testimony on how to reach a 50% recycling rate.

In addition to the summer study session, the legislature passed, and the Governor signed HEA 1183 last year. While I’m not crazy about yet more paperwork, HEA 1183 does move Indiana solid waste professionals toward establishing metrics (through more detailed reporting) by which those of us who want to practice the science correctly hold near and dear to our hearts. I am equally hopeful that in this electronic age we will be able to easily, if not virtually, be able to record data in support of those metrics . . . perhaps another diatribe in another issue from yours truly.

Among many different views presented during the summer study session to increase recycling, such as deposit legislation, more education, more curbside service, and mixed waste processing, I was the only out-of-towner who testified front and center: “Hey, if ya want to meet 50%, we gotta do more composting.” First time ever in my 35 years as a student of environmental science that I saw the deer-in-the-headlights look in such a formal hearing.

Indiana has composted yard waste for some years now. In 1991, I helped set up the Northeast (Indiana) Solid Waste District composting program immediately after the enabling state legislation was signed into law. Since then, it must be noted Indiana has moved very slowly toward any paradigm shift from waste management to resource management. Composting is not yet in the daily lexicon in Indiana as is many other states. At my last count, there were approximately 120 registered yard waste composting facilities, with Indiana’s Department of Environmental Management (IDEM). A handful of the larger composting sites (six or eight) have more recently been permitted to handle food waste. I’ve thought about that moment for some time now wondering why so many people we serve are not able to see what to some seems obvious.

Composting is probably the purest form of the practice. “Huh?”, you say; “OK, this is some really good stuff.” As compost operators, we define composting as the controlled decomposition of organic matter. Composting is a natural decomposition process: We didn’t make it, or invent it. More importantly, this natural process allows compost operators to take what heretofore was viewed as waste, and through Mother Nature herself make an “added value product.” In my district, and all across the country, compost is in demand.

This “added value product” practice, that many of us demonstrate

daily, is the heart and soul of the evolution of MSW management turning the waste into a resource.

Composting is cultural (as is MSW management), but in the sense that an old science needs to be re-invented, as folks don’t know what it is anymore.

It’s fascinating to me that even in agricultural-based communities such as Northeast Indiana, compost and composting is not yet recognized as a key recycling, or waste reduction strategy. We have much to do here in the Hoosier State to move the science of composting closer to the mainstream.

There are a number of things we can do in Indiana to enhance recycling through composting: Recognize that an entire industry is yet to be developed to compost organics in the state. Recognize the economic potential and benefits in infrastructure, jobs, wholesale, and retail sales with development of a composting/compost industry. Update existing regulation and change the paradigm from regulating waste to protect the environment, to processing a resource to enhance the environment. Changing this approach creates an “added value product” that by purchasing we continue to protect and enhance the environment. Case in point is the stormwater–water quality/compost connection: that is, compost products are in increasing use to control erosion, manage stormwater, and improve soil structure, which in turn improves water quality.

It’s important to remember final disposal here in the “Crossroads of America” is in the \$30–\$40-per-ton range. And in many cases, through contracts, disposal is even cheaper. In the absence of strong public policy to shift the paradigm, it remains difficult for other resource recovery technologies to compete. The current debate in the city of Indianapolis regarding a dirty MRF versus source separation (of recyclables) is a good example of a change in paradigm. Source separation handles the material as a resource, and mixed waste with a downstream MRF handles the material as a waste. That is why composting in Indiana will continue to grow as well, because we make an “added value product”—not from a waste, but a resource.

There are other interesting issues to be debated here in Hoosier land that really help to further the discussion of what we do as resource management professionals. A couple of examples include: highest and best use for organics, regional landfills versus non-regional recovery programs, confined animal feeding operations (CAFOs) land application versus composting of manure. Stay tuned . . . a paradigm shift to resource management might not be far off in the future. **MSW**

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