

CONSIDERING COMPOSTING?

A detailed questionnaire of what to consider before beginning.

"Composting is good for the soil and good for the soul."

Compost Marketing Plan

"Marketing plan comes first, then product development."

- A) Compost is typically put into three categories: mulch, soil amendment and blend material. What is the market need in your area for these products?
- B) Who are the buyers for the product you wish to sell, how much are they willing to pay?
- C) How is compost currently marketed? What prices are being paid in the area?
- D) What quality of compost is the market interested in?
- E) What is the anticipated market volume for compost in the area in the next 5, 10, 20 years? Competition is rising all over the country, but compost will always be in continuous demand.
- F) What is the farthest point in miles you would sell to and whom would be interested in purchasing compost from you? (delivery/pick-up range)
- G) What are the customers' requirements and perceptions of the product you will be producing?
- H) Would you sell the compost in bags, by cubic yard or truckload? (need for a bagging machine?)
- I) Have you thought about branding your product for name recognition?
- J) How close to a community are you where you can accept extra compost materials?
- K) What local connections do you have in the community that would be key partnerships? These may include local nurseries, garden shops, growers, schools or a solid waste district that may assist with loans, equipment and direct oversight of the operation.
- L) Some say there are 4 main markets for compost: excavators, landscapers, growers and retailers. What is the market and possible connections for each to work with in your area?
- M) What type and how much of competing products are used, by whom, when, for how much and what?
- N) What are user perceptions and requirements with competing products? Are there cultural barriers constraining the use of compost in your area?
- O) How are competing products marketed?
- P) Have you thought about treating compost like a food product to get money upfront before the season, much like growers do with food crops in a farm-share?
- Q) What strategies can be created to develop a new market for compost?

Compost Uses

"It's one thing to know how to make compost. It's another thing to know what to do with it after you make it."

- A) What are your main purposes of generating compost? (diversion or export of waste, cost savings, mulch, soil, inadequate landbase, animal bedding, fertilizer, training, steady employment, as substitutes for existing soil products, kill weed seeds, create value product to generate profit, potential new uses such as flower pots, etc.)
- B) Do you wish to use the compost on your farm or sell the compost and make a profit?
- C) How much compost would you want to keep on-site and how much could potentially be sold, when?
- D) How much compost would you need for nutrient depleted fields or erosion control needs?

- E) Would you include compost in your nutrient management plan? If compost was used for on-farm nutrient management, what crops would the compost be applied to?
- F) Are you interested in using the compost for animal bedding? Are you interested in selling additional bedding to other farms? (would need to make sure pathogens are killed at high temperatures)
- G) How much manure would you still want diverted to the manure pit?
- H) What might be some of your unmet compost needs on your farm site?

Current Farm Practices

“Strategic business planning and continuous learning are increasing in importance in agriculture.”

- A) Note exact number and weights of animals on the farm today and projected ideal animal numbers (for calves, heifers, dry cows, and milkers, also, average milk production volume per animal/year).
- B) What volume of manure, bedding, spoiled silage/haylage/hay volume would be available for composting?
- C) Do you need to export “P” from your farm? If so, how much.
- D) Where is manure currently stored and disposed of?
- E) How much bedding volume is used/month? How much does your bedding cost/month? What types of bedding do you use?
- F) Has the waste including manure and bedding material been tested? What is the nutrient content of tested waste for N, P, K?
- G) Is grey water currently recycled on your farm? If so, where does it originally come from and what is the recycled water used for? (possible to use to keep compost at appropriate moisture content)
- H) Have you considered the location needed for the operation in relation to what is available? A , large concrete pad or old parking lot, old warehouse or open air shed with roof, drainage system for the compost leachate, etc.
- I) Have you considered the area needed for the operation: flat to gently sloping topography (2-5%), located outside the 100-yr flood zone, stable soils, buffer from water bodies, number of acres, etc.
- J) Indicate the average rainfall per year and the three highest rainfall months. Indicate the average high and low temperatures per year and when they are during the year.
- K) Do you have scaled drawings of the farmland that would aid in planning purposes?
- L) How is manure currently applied to fields and to what crops is it applied to? (e.g. topical, side dressing, plowed, top dressed, or disked into the soil) When is it applied?
- M) Do you have access to the town wastewater system? If so, what is the cost to dispose of the liquid manure on a per-volume or nutrient-content basis?
- N) Are chemical fertilizers used? What fertilizers do you use on what crops? How much money and man-hrs do you spend on fertilizers per year? per acre?
- O) How much money and man-hrs do you spend on spreading liquid/solid manure on your fields per year? per acre?
- P) Do you have fields that are nutrient or organic matter depleted that may benefit from applied compost spreading? What is the acreage of these fields?
- Q) Do you have areas on your farm that need erosion control (such as continuous corn)? What is the acreage of these areas? (unscreened material is great for erosion control)
- R) List types of equipment currently owned or could be borrowed for the compost operation. This might include: a separator, grinder, mixer, conveyor, blower, sprinklers, water truck, drip hoses, sprinklers, fans, bucket loader or modified turner bucket, specific compost turner, reception pit with agitator, compost bagger, screen separator, solid manure spreader, etc.

- S) What is the condition of your farm equipment and the frequency that it is serviced and cleaned? How much control over farm maintenance is the norm on your farm? Are systems with high or low maintenance intervals preferred in relation to high or low associated costs?
- T) Evaluate your farm's access to capital and on-going budget needs.
- U) How does your farm respond to risk?
- V) Identify funding sources available to you, such as alt-manure money, BMP, equip, grant money.
- W) Does your farm have any experience producing or using compost or similar products?
- X) Do you currently use and/or purchase soil products? (e.g. compost, mulch, bark, peat moss, soil mixes) How much are you spending on these products per year?

Compost Operation

"Regular maintenance is next to godliness."

- A) How close are neighboring farms? Would these farms be interested in sharing equipment such as a compost turner or bagging machine?
- B) What type of quality compost would you want to produce: screened or unscreened? (input effort to output return)
- C) Would you add anything to the manure, such as school food waste, yard scraps such as leaves/wood chips, paper materials, spoiled straw and silage, crop debris, dead animals or other material? What is the volume of each? (sometimes more nutrients and bulk improves compost aeration and break-down)
- D) How does the material you have for composting match the requirements of good composting?
- E) What type and size of composting piles or windrows would your site/location be suited to?
- F) What style of composting are you interested in, with respect to your site: static piles, turned windrows, drum-type composters, bag-type composters, mechanized "continuous flow" worm systems, turned or agitated bays or beds, box-type in-vessel units, "Dutch tunnels", etc.
- G) Do you want to aerate the compost piles, passive or active aeration?
- H) Have you considered composting worms, or vermiculture to create a high-end product?
- I) Do you wish to have a system that is more dependent on human labor or mechanical equipment? (a 'hands-off' process takes longer than one that is frequently mixed)
- J) It is possible to bed your animals on dried matter that is composting. Are you interested in investigating new techniques such as this?
- K) Do you have storage capacity for stored compost? For how many months?
- L) Do you have farm help that would be dedicated to the detailed management of the composting operation? (frequency piles are turned, fixing aeration devices, dealing with extra rainfall, checking temperatures, odors, equipment issues, compost moisture, etc.)
- M) The brand of machines is very important to investigate so they are reliable and cost productive. Sometimes you can lease a product for a few months to see how it operates with your materials. What type of equipment do you prefer to use? That which is new or leased, general or specialized, low or high technology based?
- N) Do you have back-up equipment and systems if needed for the compost operation?
- O) Do you wish to have a year-round or partial-year operation? (would you be season-dependent)
- P) Do any rules, legislation or regulations with the town or state exist to constrain the production of compost on your site? This may include stormwater policies, wetlands protection, air quality issues, building/construction permits, testing the compost a certain # times/year, etc.
- Q) Do you believe you have the ability to set-up and begin composting this waste right away? Or are you interested in a pilot project using existing resources?
- R) What is the cost range you are anticipating for an operational composting system?