

On Farm Composting with a Kick

Oh, for a farmer's life in the Green Mountain State; languid cows for milking, sweet corn for sowing and balmy days for haying. But the life of a farmer isn't all bread and roses; mixed in with the honest hard work are a few fairly unpleasant aspects. For example, what's a farmer to do with a post-life cow, pig, sheep or chicken...?

A few decades ago this unavoidable farming feature was a non-issue. Rendering facilities would pick up animals for free. Then came a few health regulations and farmers were charged for pick-up. Then came a changing of the times and these services increased fees or went out of business altogether.

These days the few rendering facilities available to Vermonters charge \$70 to pick up a cow-sized critter. With milk prices so low, that's money that a dairy farmer has little to spare. What, then, are the options and what are the economic, biological and social factors that a farmer must consider in deciding what to do with that cow?

Drag it out to the back 40? Certainly the cheapest and easiest solution, but there are a few drawbacks. Feed them and they will come; coyotes! The 'drag' method also spreads disease and parasites. Not convinced? Consider relationships with the neighbors; things could go downhill pretty quick when Fido drags part of that old rotting carcass home.

Bury it? Cost-effective and easy, except in winter. However, a cow takes two years to decompose, all the while releasing harmful bacteria and ammonia into ground water. A few dead cows seems like nothing to worry over? Remember that there are about 280,000 dairy cows in Vermont. With the average dairy herd mortality rate at 4.3%, that's potentially 12,000 cows in the ground every year. And that's a lot of bad fodder into ground water.

What's left? What is the affordable, easy, safe and reliable solution for dealing with animal mortalities on the farm?

Compost it! Though an old concept, it isn't often applied to animal mortalities. It is the recommended option, though, as it's environmentally safer and more biosecure.

Composting is the art and science of mixing materials like food wastes, manure and wood chips with air, water and bacteria. Over time and with a little maintenance, the bacteria in the compost pile work to digest these wastes and produce compost. The sweet earthy smelling material can be added back to the garden, enriching the soil.

The home composter is likely familiar with the warning against putting animal wastes in the compost pile and it's still advised, though this is purely a volume issue. The home composter has a very small pile which generates less heat during composting and, therefore, doesn't kill the parasites associated with animal wastes.

The farmer, however, has big piles of ready supplies for the composting process; straw, old feed, sawdust and manure. Most farms with large animals also have the necessary equipment; backhoes!

For county farmers interested in this unusual but safe and effective option, setting up the mortality compost pile is a simple layering process, requiring only a few tweaks to meet the individual needs and conditions of the farm. (The Conservation District can send you a brochure with more information, and has also produced a video on the subject.) A well planned mortality compost pile should require little maintenance – less, in fact, than that needed by the backyard composter - and will have no odor, flies or scavenger problems. Then, in about 6 months; mounds of rich compost.

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