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Burying Organics Stinks: The Compost Solution

Future superfund sites

One of the best kept secrets about [landfills](#) today is that they only delay rather than prevent environmental contamination. The reason: in the U.S. we are perpetuating the obsolete practice of discarding decomposable matter – things like unrecovered paper, food scraps and yard trimmings – in the ground, along with the substantial toxic loadings that are a part of our waste.

This makes the landfill biologically active for centuries, and leads to intractable problems for two reasons. First, their decay creates the greenhouse gas, methane, which also transports other hazardous volatile organic compounds in our waste into the atmosphere, and transforms elemental mercury from discarded batteries and switches into its lethal nerve gas form, di-methyl mercury. Second, as those organic materials decompose, they also leach carcinogenic compounds out of the waste load and, after the liners deteriorate, through the ground into our grandchildren's drinking water supplies.

Waste as resource

What's the first essential step to protecting the environment from these hazards in our waste? That's simple. Just like we currently separate our recyclables from our trash in our kitchen for reuse, we need to separate our organic material to be separately collected as well and composted.

At present vast amounts of organic materials – paper, wood, food waste and yard trimmings – are still being landfilled or incinerated. In fact, organic materials comprise 60 to 65% of the waste going to

municipal waste landfills. These materials not only contaminate 'dry' recyclables, they also produce the methane gas which makes landfills a significant contributor to global warming. No pun intended, but this is truly a terrible waste.

An ancient solution whose time has come: Composting

Implementing systems to divert, collect and recycle the waste stream's organic fraction will not only minimize the hazards associated with landfilling but is a necessary step toward successful local composting programs. Hundreds of successful public as well as private large-scale composting programs exist around the country, naturally manufacturing a product that provides substantial environmental and economic benefits. Additional success will be achieved through the commitment and creativity of local governments combined, where necessary, with higher target recycling rates and landfill bans applied to a broad range of organic materials.

Only a handful of such programs take in diverted residential food wastes. The City and County of San Francisco offers one of the best examples of successful citywide commercial and residential food waste diversion programs. The collected organic materials are transported to a composting facility where they are combined with yard wastes to produce nitrogen-rich compost. Moreover, the food waste collection program has substantially increased the City's recycling rates, thereby reducing its reliance on costly, out-dated landfilling practices.



