

Case Study:

Marketing On-Farm Compost

The Northeast Recycling Council (NERC) is a non-profit organization that conducts research, hands-on projects, training, and outreach on issues associated with source reduction, recycling, composting, environmentally preferable purchasing, and decreasing the toxicity of the solid waste stream.

Integrating composting practices into farming operations and refining compost production and utilization methods can help farmers better manage farm organic waste, including manure and crop residues. The resulting compost can be applied for on-farm soil benefits and/or sold as a valued-added product. To expand and support farm-based compost markets in the Northeast, NERC was awarded a grant from the Northeast Sustainable Agriculture Research and Education (SARE) program. Resources developed by NERC for the project, as well as presentations from seven compost marketing workshops, are posted on NERC's website. NERC provided technical assistance to farm compost operations, including development of operation-specific marketing plans.

Amend Organics Amherst, Massachusetts

Overview

[Amend Organics](#) is an agriculture-based company that provides full service waste reduction and composting services to farmers, commercial food generators, towns, and special events in western Massachusetts, Connecticut, and southern Vermont. The company collects and recycles organics—from leaves, cow manure, and horse bedding to food scraps—into all-natural organic farming and gardening products.

Amend Organics was founded to assist livestock farmers with nutrient load management and food waste generators, such as restaurants, grocery stores, and special events, to reduce their waste through the diversion of beneficial organic material. Amend Organics' mission is to "Complete the Loop," from farm to table and back to the farm.

Amend Organics began composting operations in October 2012. It has a set-term lease with the [New England Small Farming Institute \(NESFI\)](#), where collected organics are managed in windrows. Its primary operation is at [Book & Plow Farm](#), a registered farm in Amherst, Massachusetts. Book & Plow Farm is a diversified vegetable farm that began operation in the spring of 2013 on 45 acres of farmland on Amherst College property. Amend Organics has a "land for service" agreement with the farm to provide a set amount of compost and fertility management assistance annually in exchange for the use of the land. Currently, the compost operation has more than 600 yards of organics in several windrows on about one acre of land. In addition, Amend has 4,000 square feet of outdoor vermiculture plots.





The owner and primary operator of Amend Organics, Cam Weimar, is certified to operate compost facilities in the states of Massachusetts, Maine, and Vermont. He is a graduate of several compost operator trainings, including the Massachusetts Department of Agriculture (2012), the Highfields Center for Composting (2011), and the Maine Compost School training program (2011), as well as Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources (MDAR) Exploring the Small Farm Dream (2010) course. Mr. Weimar also participated in NERC's Compost Marketing workshop in March 2012. He holds a Ph.D. in Environmental Planning from the University of Michigan. Mr. Weimar provides consulting for Connecticut FarmLink, a new farmer program.

Materials Composted

Amend Organics accepts and processes agricultural material, including manure, produce discards, and silage, along with wood chips, food scraps, compostable packaging, soiled paper, yard trimmings, brush, and leaves. The company collects approximately 80 cubic yards of horse manure and bedding each month from a local horse operation, as well as an average of 20 cubic yards of manure from a dairy operation. Leaves are collected from the Town of Amherst leaf pile. A fee of \$35 to \$90 per hour is charged for manure collection, depending on whether materials are loaded by Amend Organics or by the generating farm operation.



Amend Organics also has a food scraps collection program at the Town of Amherst Transfer Station. In addition, it provides collection carts for food scraps, soiled paper, and other organics, along with collection services for area special events. To date these events have included the Taste of Amherst, the Cummington Fair in Massachusetts, the Wanderlust Festival in Vermont, and several conference events.

Compost Method and Equipment

Amend Organics offers a "complete the loop" waste diversion service, from source separation and hauling organics to manufacturing compost for use on New England farms, in greenhouses, for landscaping, and in gardens.

Collection equipment owned by Amend Organics includes a trailer with a 10,000 pound payload, used for collection of manure, bedding, and other organics. The trailer is hauled by a pickup truck. A stake-bed dump truck with a Tommy Lift is used for delivery and collection of agricultural residues, as well as holding 65-gallon collection carts owned by Amend for use at town food scrap collection areas, businesses, and special events. Both the trailer and dump truck are also used for delivery of compost.



A Kabota Tractor (46 HP), also owned by Amend Organics, is used to form collected materials into windrows (elongated piles). The tractor is also used for loading manure and bedding for hauling, as well as finished product for sale. A spreader wagon is used, as necessary, to break-up clumps and produce a more consistent compost product.



Collected materials are monitored closely for potential contaminants. Mr. Weimar offers employee/volunteer training as a part of his collection services in order to help ensure a clean feedstock stream. Signage and handouts on acceptable materials are also distributed to customers.

Vermicompost is produced in wooden boxes constructed by Mr. Weimar.

Marketing

Amend Organics has an impressive website to promote its wide range of collection and composting services. Mr. Weimar has launched an effective name recognition campaign with “Amend Organics” on its collection carts, trucks, and all signage.

Its advertising message is posted on its website and educational materials: *Become a part of “Completing the Loop” in the Pioneer Valley! Most folks are familiar with the “Farm to Table” concept in supporting their local food system. Join us in fully realizing a sustainable food system by “Completing the Loop - from farm to table & back to the farm!”*



Strategies used to develop the Amend Organics compost operation and marketing capacity include:

- Attending Compost Operator Trainings: Massachusetts Department of Agriculture (2012), the Highfields Center for Composting (2011), and the Maine Compost School training program (2011), as well as Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources (MDAR) Exploring the Small Farm Dream (2010) course.
- Attending the Northeast Recycling Council’s Compost Marketing workshop in March 2012
- Developing a compost marketing plan
- Amend Organics [website](#), launched in 2012
- Listed on [RecyclingWorks in Massachusetts](#)
- [Facebook page](#), started in February 2013

Amend Organics designed signage and brochures used at the Amherst Transfer Station to explain the food scrap collection program, as well as educational materials for other customers provided with Amend Organics collection services. Waste assessments are also offered to assist potential customers.

Compost Utilization, Customer Base, and Sales

Amend Organics collects and accepts spent agricultural materials and other valuable organic materials to process into high quality soil blends, compost, vermicompost, and compost tea products.

It also purchased compost from [Bear Path Farm](#) in Whately, Massachusetts at wholesale rates to package and sell at the Easthampton (Massachusetts) Farmers Market in the spring of 2013. This was done to promote Amend Organics services and to explore pricing and packaging options for the operation’s own products.



Vermicompost bin, screener, and vermicompost ready for sale (in tubs)



Compostable bags are sold through the Amherst Transfer Station for use in the municipal food scrap collection program. Participants are required to use the bags in which to collect their food scraps. The revenue generated from the bag sales (which includes the cost of the bags and an extra fee for collection) goes to Amend Organics to defray the costs of collecting and processing.

In 2013, 150 gallons (~ 900 pounds) of vermicompost was harvested. The material will be tested, bagged, and marketed for sale in early 2014. Greenhouse planting trials in fall 2013 will be done to test and promote the product.

Challenges and Solutions

Challenge: Getting restaurants and cafes to respond to solicitations about compost collection.

Solution: Provide free waste assessment consulting services, which hopefully will lead to collection contracts.

Challenge: Collection of food scraps and soiled paper can create an “unsightly” appearance due to the slower decomposition of paper. Also, food scraps have attracted wild turkeys which dig into the piles.

Solution: Windrows which contain food scraps and soiled paper are fully covered using textile covers in order to cover any unsightliness and to deter wild turkeys.

Challenge: Determining the best way to make sales and gain market penetration.

Solution: A multi-pronged approach which has included some marketing of bagged compost at a local farmers markets in order to test product pricing and gain exposure; development of a website and Facebook page for increased exposure; and a focus on collection to both gain material input and exposure. As more product is developed, outreach will be expanded to include retail outlets and agricultural operations. Trials with finished compost will be set-up to promote Amend Organics’ products and gain customer trust.

Future Plans

Amend Organics presents an innovative business model for agricultural operations offering collection services for farm generated organics, including manure, and collection services to other organics generators as well, including food scraps. These materials are composted on farm for use as a soil amendment to benefit the farm and sold as a value-added product for revenue.



Future plans include:

- Test and explore packaging options for harvested vermiculture for market sales beginning in early 2014
- Market and sell cured compost in early spring 2014
- Initiate aerated-static pile method in fall 2013 to accelerate decomposition of collected organics in order to produce more volume of sellable product sell for the 2014 growing season
- Increase outdoor vermiculture plots from 4000 square feet to 7000 square feet

For More Information:

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