

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.

Aquidneck Farms **Portsmouth, Rhode Island**

Overview

In 1998, the van Beuren siblings took control of a rundown 240-acre farm overlooking the scenic Sakonnet River in Portsmouth, Rhode Island. Although the property had once been renowned for its prizewinning Jersey dairy cattle and Hereford beef, it had been out of active agriculture for decades. None of the siblings were farmers but all had a passion for land conservation. Portsmouth, like much of coastal New England, was and still is under enormous development pressure. The siblings were unified in their mutual interest to find an environmentally sustainable, economically viable use for the property. After five years of planning the land was divided between the three. A conservation easement limited future building and restricted land use to agriculture.

Inspired by the property's livestock legacy, one sibling decided to reestablish cattle on the farm. In 2003, [Aquidneck Farms](#) began operating—growing hay and grass silage and experimenting with cattle breeds in order to build a grass-fed beef business. Today, Aquidneck Farms manages close to 400 acres of prime agricultural land all within one mile of the original farm.

Aquidneck Farms raises 125 head herd, a mix of pure Angus and an Angus/Hereford cross. The farm is renowned for its grass-fed beef and pastured poultry. Hay and grass silage grown on the farm is used to feed the livestock. Compost is manufactured to fertilize the farm's pastures and provide an additional revenue source for the farm.





Aquidneck Farms' compost operation was started in 2009. The compost is made from a combination of horse bedding and bedded pack cattle manure. Purchased woodchips are mixed with the bedded pack. Until recently, most of the finished compost had been spread on the farm's 160 acres of pasture. Surplus compost is now being sold to farm customers, landscapers, and other farmers.

Aquidneck Farms compost is promoted through the farm's website and through its farm stand. Product is sold direct from the farm and bulk orders can be delivered by farm operators.

Aquidneck Farms' Farm Management Plan was approved by the Natural Resource Conservation Service (NRCS). All farm practices have been reviewed and approved by the Rhode Island Department of Environmental Management, Division of Agriculture and the Aquidneck Land Trust.

Jim Booth, Farm Manager of Aquidneck Farms, and Mike Victor, Livestock Manager, run the compost business in conjunction with their other farm duties.



Materials Composted

Approximately three cubic yards of day-old horse bedding from two horse farms is delivered daily to Aquidneck Farms. The material is very clean and free of contaminants. The bedding is first spread in the cattle barn as bedded pack for the cattle. Manure from the cattle barn and the bedded pack is then removed to the compost area. Purchased woodchips are mixed with the bedded pack to create a proper carbon to nitrogen ratio for composting.

Compost Method and Equipment

Compost feedstocks (ingredients) are mixed into windrows (elongated windrows) using a front-end loader. Windrows are monitored and turned with a backhoe. The compost is sold screened and not screened. The farm shares a screener with a local landscaping business to help keep expenses down.

Refillable two-bushel totes for compost are available for purchase at the farm store. Aquidneck Farm personnel will load compost into the totes for customers; bulk compost can also be loaded into customer vehicles. Delivery of bulk compost is also available for a nominal fee.

Marketing

Marketing Aquidneck Farms' compost has largely focused on targeting its farm customer based. The Farm's highly successful grass-fed beef brings in a great deal of customer traffic to the farm stand. Compost is featured as a farm product at both the farm stand and the Aquidneck Farms website. Aquidneck Farms beef products are available at local farmers markets, in specialty stores and restaurants as well as directly off the farm, offering a wide customer base for potential compost sales.



Aquidneck Farms website is used to target current and potential farm customers. Website promotion and social media has proved to be effective in marketing the farm's products. The farm also uses social media to promote its products, with regular Facebook postings and email announcements.

Additional compost marketing capacity building and strategies include:

- Attending a NERC compost marketing workshop
- Development of a compost marketing plan
- Consulting with compost experts on pricing, packaging labels, etc.
- Good use of simple packaging to hold down costs, be attractive, and meet the needs of customers
- Word-of-mouth to existing farm customers and local landscapers

Compost Utilization, Customer Base, and Sales

Designing an appropriate compost operation to meet manure management needs of the farm and provide sufficient compost product for on-farm soil amendment was the primary goal of establishing the compost operation at Aquidneck Farms. The compost operation also helps to diversify the farm business and provides a viable source of additional revenues.

Approximately two-thirds of the compost produced by Aquidneck Farms is used as a soil amendment on farm fields for hay and silage production. The remaining compost is sold in the local community. The first load of compost was sold in April 2010 (200 yards), and sales have continued to grow since.

Bulk compost is sold both on-farm and delivered. Refillable two-bushel totes for compost are available for purchase at the farm store. Farm personnel will load compost into the totes for customers; bulk compost can also be loaded into customer vehicles. Delivery of bulk compost is also available for a nominal fee. Compost is sold for \$35 per cubic yard.

The farm compost operation grossed approximately \$22,000 in 2012. Primary customers include commercial landscapers and estate gardeners, along with regular farm customers. Bulk product is screened to order.

Challenges and Solutions

Challenge: Managing a full-time farm operation while trying to diversify the farm operation to include composting.

Solution: Build the compost operation as a means to meet the needs of the farm's manure management and soil amendment needs, allowing for surplus to be sold locally. This has allowed the compost operation to slowly grow and fit into the overall operation of the farm.

Challenge: Expanding into new markets, such as vineyards.

Solution: Developing a marketing plan and researching compost uses for vineyards and other agricultural practices in order to educate potential customers

Future Plans

Aquidneck Farms strives to grow and diversify its farm operations in a sustainable manner, benefiting the farm and the Portsmouth community. The compost operation meets the manure management needs of the farm and provides a valuable soil amendment to apply to hay and silage fields. The operation's goal is to continue to develop and sell a consistent premium compost product.

Farm operators would like to increase compost production sufficiently to move toward more bulk sales, preferably without screening the end product. Its loyal farm customer base has proved to be effective for moving its compost product. They will also continue to build their customer base with marketing to landscapers, estate gardeners, and agricultural operations.

For More Information

Jim Booth or Mike Victor

Aquidneck Farms

info@aquidneckfarms.com

www.aquidneckfarms.com