

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.

Newland Farm

Norton, Massachusetts

Overview

[Newland Farm](#) is a small farm located in southeastern Massachusetts. It specializes in raising emus and sales of emu products. Newland Farm also operates a compost site on 22 acres. Yard trimmings, including leaves and brush, as well as food scraps, are processed into compost. The owner and farm operator is Earl Willcott.

Newland Farm Compost is produced with good quality ingredients and a consistent recipe. Yard trimmings, including leaves and brush, as well as food scraps, are processed into compost on the farm.

The finished Newland Farm Compost is marketed as a rich, dark soil conditioner that adds vital organic matter and nutrients to regular soil. Products include screened and unscreened finished compost as well as a premium screened loam/compost mix. Compost has been marketed locally and in some direct retail sales.

The farm compost operation has one full-time employee plus the farm operator/owner.

Materials Composted

A blend of leaf, yard trimmings, and ground brush comprise the primary carbon materials that go into making Newland Farm Compost. Cranberry sludge and unmarketable cranberries are the primary nitrogen sources. Crab shells from a fish processing facility are delivered on occasional basis.



Stumps previously dumped at the site are mined and put with brush into a grinder to mix in with feedstocks. Loam under the stump area is used in the end product.

Compost Method and Equipment

The Town of Norton delivers leaves and yard trimmings from its residential recycling drop-off center. Additional leaves, yard trimmings, and brush are delivered by local haulers and landscapers. Cranberry sludge and unmarketable cranberries are delivered by private haulers. Crab shells from a fish processing facility are delivered on an occasional basis, also by private haulers. Tipping fees of \$25-\$30 per ton are charged to generators (excluding the Town of Norton).

The organic materials are combined in mixing bays using a front loader as soon as material is delivered. Mixed material is then formed into windrows (elongated piles) and turned regularly to promote the composting process. Finished compost is cured and tested.

Some grinding of yard trimmings and brush is done; stumps previously dumped at the site are mined and combined with brush in a grinder. A tub grinder is rented for this process. Loam under the stump area is used in a screened loam/compost mix end product.

Marketing

Newland Farm's owner and operator has a background in landscape architecture and brings to the compost business extensive knowledge and experience with the landscape and construction industries. This allows him to have a strong handle on potential leads and industry contacts.

Most promotion is done by word-of mouth, knocking on doors, and "chasing leads." The owner looks for remediation, development, and construction projects in the area for marketing product. He also works with haulers to sell finished compost to their customers.

Newland Farm Compost has a [website](#) which has a description of the farm's compost products, compost product analysis, and compost uses. A Newland Farm [Facebook page](#) was also recently developed.

To enhance its marketing capacity, Newland Farm:

- Researched compost marketing techniques by
 - Attending a NERC compost marketing workshop
 - Developing a compost marketing plan
 - Consulting with compost experts, on pricing, packaging labels, etc.
- Researched area compost products, how they are sold, priced, etc.





Compost Utilization, Customer Base, and Sales

The finished Newland Farm Compost is marketed as a rich, dark soil conditioner that adds vital organic matter and nutrients to regular soil. Products include screened and unscreened finished compost as well as a premium screened loam/compost mix. Compost has been marketed locally and in some direct retail sales. Approximately 60 percent of the current product is sold through three wholesale operations.

The farm provides loading and delivery of finish compost. It can deliver 10-20 cubic yard loads and will hire subcontractors to haul 40 cubic yard deliveries.

Challenges and Solutions

Challenge: Plastic bags from residential yard waste is a problem

Solution: The operator has tried to work with Town of Norton officials to prevent residents from bagging yard trimmings in plastic bags. This has helped some, along with monitoring loads as the material is dumped in order to remove plastic bags. Screening final product is also done to remove any remaining plastic.

Challenge: Sales are down the last few years. Other compost operators in the area have been selling compost at lower than market prices, making it difficult to compete.

Solution: Continued targeted marketing in the landscape and construction businesses should help increase sales as the economy improves.

Challenge: Difficult and time consuming for a small operation to sell retail.

Solution: The operator focuses on wholesale business development and larger, bulk retail customers.

Future Plans

While there is increased competition from new compost operations coming into the immediate area, numerous opportunities for expansion of Newland Compost products into landscaping and construction projects exist. The pending Massachusetts proposal to ban disposal of food scraps from large generators will undoubtedly open up some opportunity for gaining revenues by accepting food scraps for tipping fees.

Additional goals include:

- Continue to increase product sales through wholesalers, instead of direct retail
- Expand marketing to increase customer base and sales to 12,000 cubic yards per year

For More Information

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