

Food-waste education key to composting's success

January 30, 2013

Mike Virga, executive director of the U.S. Composting Council recently talked with the National Restaurant Association about the state of composting and what restaurateurs need to know about it. The USCC's 21st annual conference and tradeshow was Jan. 28 through 31, in Orlando. The NRA, a partner of the USCC, participated in this year's program.

Q. What do you want the public to know about composting?

A. We are on an accelerated growth curve. One of my favorite quotes is from Matthew McKenna, the CEO of Keep America Beautiful. He said, "Composting is the next wave of environmentalism," which is a powerful statement, and I agree with him fully. What we're seeing now is new programs, new facilities and new creative efforts at collection, transport and so on.

Q. What are the benefits of the partnership between the NRA and the USCC?

A. In this country, we produce 34 million tons of food scraps, and 97 percent of it goes to the landfill. That's a problem, but it's also an opportunity. There's a lot of work to be done, on building education and awareness programs, especially when it comes to food scraps. By partnering with the NRA, we can educate the foodservice industry about the sustainable and economic benefits of composting, rather than sending waste material to traditional landfills. I think there are many in the industry that already recognize there are opportunities out there that make the business case.

Q. What are the opportunities and the business case of composting?

A. Well, it's got to make sense from environmental and economic standpoints. From an economic standpoint, you've got to do some work, figure out the hauling and collection costs and compare and contrast that with the cost of sending waste material to a landfill, versus a composting facility. Those numbers are based on hauling distance and the infrastructure the collection source. It works when you can demonstrate it's less expensive to collect it and send it to a compost facility than to the landfill.

Q. What do restaurateurs need to know about composting?

A. They need to know there are significant challenges ahead, beyond what I just described, in terms of the business case and the hauling and collection costs and tipping fees. But those challenges can be met. They also need to know that this must be an education effort with employees. It is such a dramatic change in terms of what they've done in the past — scraping off all of those food scraps on a plate right into the trash and into the landfill. And they need to help build awareness through training: explain why it's important, what needs to get done and how to properly perform source separation at the restaurant.

Q. What are the challenges in capturing food waste for composting?

A. When it comes to food scraps, you've got the "yuck factor" where employees aren't necessarily used to scraping food off and separating it from other material. When you add a composting effort to your repertoire, you add another bucket, and that doesn't happen overnight. But it can be very successful.

Q. How can the small operator afford it?

A. Smaller independent restaurants working alone face challenges [because of cost] so they can try to partner with other restaurants in their areas. It's a concentrated effort. If you work together to improve infrastructure and problematic elements of logistics on collection, it becomes more economically viable to make the shift.

Q. Is the infrastructure the toughest aspect of this whole thing?

A. The infrastructure is a limiting factor. If you don't have the composting facility or the economic haul, what are you going to do? If you put a ban in place where the infrastructure doesn't exist, it won't work. Another factor is collection cost. Then there's education and training. You can educate and build awareness, but you also have to train workers to do what you want them to do, such as source separation in the restaurant.

Q. What are some big truths about the current state of composting?

A. Recycling organics is an absolute necessity. It's a big part of becoming more of a zero-waste society. Organic materials are some of the [biggest] components of the waste stream that go to the landfill. That's a fact, so we have a lot of work to capture that and keep it out of the landfill.

Q. What is the future of composting?

A. It's happening now, but if I had a crystal ball, I'd say its going to look very different in five years. That 3 percent captured from landfills is going to be at least doubled or even 10 percent or more.