

# Composting programs keep organic waste out of landfills

They also could generate revenue on the carbon market, group says



*Organic waste in landfills generate methane, a greenhouse gas.*

**A** growing number of local governments are promoting composting to divert organic waste from landfills to reduce the creation of the greenhouse gas (GHG) methane and in the process create rich soil for sale or public use. And this summer, an environmental group published instructions for how to take composting programs to the carbon market to generate revenue for local governments.

Currently, about 65 percent of yard waste and 2.5 percent of food waste is being composted or reused, according to Sally Brown, research and associate professor at

the University of Washington College of the Environment in Seattle and a leading national expert on composting and soil. The composting trend is picking up steam nationwide, Brown says. "In terms of municipalities, many more are talking about this," she said, adding that she has received inquiries from Pennsylvania, Delaware and the Carolinas.

Alameda County, Calif., has subsidized residential composting bins since 1991 and has collected food and yard waste since 2002. Overall, annual waste sent to the landfill declined 24 percent between 2000 and 2008, according to the county.

Still, there is room for improvement, says Robin Plutchok, program manager for StopWaste.Org, the county's waste management and recycling agency. In 1990, Alameda set a goal to reduce waste by 75 percent between 1990 and 2010. As of 2008, the diversion rate was at 67 percent. "We'd like to see more households participating, so we're working to grow that," Plutchok says.

Portland, Ore., has operated a voluntary commercial food scrap collection program for the past five years and launched a pilot program earlier this year for residential curbside food scrap collections. The city aims to divert 35 percent of its waste by 2015 and to have 75 percent participation in recycling and composting in that timeframe, says Roy Kaufmann, a spokesperson for the city. "We're close to 70 percent of recycling, and we're confident the city will quickly adopt the residential composting program," Kaufmann says.

A protocol released in June by a California environmental group could give local governments with composting programs a financial incentive for measuring the greenhouse gas emission reductions from those programs. The Los Angeles-based Climate Action Reserve's (CAR) Organic Waste Composting Project Protocol was created to show cities and counties how to create a revenue stream from composting by developing carbon offset projects and trading in carbon credits. Local governments and other parties that initiate composting projects can use the protocol to register GHG reductions with CAR, which then allows the cities to sell carbon credits on carbon exchange markets.

— **Autumn Giusti** is a New Orleans-based freelance writer.