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Thinking green, saving money

From supermarkets to farmland; AZN2 has dollars-and-sense concept for disposing of organic garbage

BY MARK CARDWELL, FREELANCE FEBRUARY 2, 2010

The stench of rotting produce carries the sweet smell of success for Michel Dufour.

As founder and president of the small Montreal company AZN2 Environnement, he has been overseeing weekly pickups of past-due-date fruits and vegetables from several supermarkets in Montreal's West Island in the past year.

The materials are taken to a farm near Vaudreuil, where Dufour pays to have them mixed and composted with manure, straw and other organic materials.

The result is less greenhouse gas-causing organic waste in our urban landfill sites, lower garbage pickup fees for store owners and free super-enriched soil for the farmer to spread on his fields.

Dufour's dollar-and-sense concept for the disposal of organic garbage has worked so well, he is to open a similar operation in Quebec City this month, with hopes of exporting the model beyond Quebec's border before 2011.

"I've developed a very simple business solution to a very big environmental problem," the budding entrepreneur said. "It's something that can be done almost anywhere using existing infrastructure."

Dufour said he hit on the idea a few years ago while doing marketing work for an industrial composting company. He learned about the huge costs supermarkets face in disposing of organic waste. Thrown out with regular garbage, the rotting materials end up in municipal landfill sites, where, once buried, they decompose and release millions of cubic metres of methane gas into the atmosphere - adding, experts say, to global warming.

Dufour also learned about composting, a natural open-air process that converts organic material into top-grade soil without creating methane gas. He became aware, too, that many agricultural producers had the space, the means and the need - though not necessarily the infrastructure or the know-how - to compost the organic materials they generated on their farms, everything from straw, manure and fertilizers to leftover fruits, vegetables and flowers.

"I put two and two together," he said. "The trick was to figure out a way to make it a viable business venture."

He first developed a system for composting organic materials from grocery stores with the help of Serge Poulin.

A recently retired professor at the Institut de technologie agroalimentaire in La Pocatière, Poulin has developed and managed composting projects using organic waste from homes, businesses and farms in the rural Lower St. Lawrence region. Those projects enabled him to build a catalogue of recipes and procedures for the year-round mixing and composting of urban organic garbage with farm residues.

"Micro-organisms - mostly bacteria - do all the work," Poulin said. "The trick is knowing what, when and how to mix."

Poulin also favours composting for the disposal of organic material over large-scale biogas-making projects like the \$14-million organic waste treatment plant that was announced last month in Rivière du Loup.

"Composting is a lot cheaper," he said. "It's cleaner, too, when you think of all the gas that is burned collecting and shipping the huge amounts of organic materials that are needed to make a plant like that function."

With Poulin's know-how and technical support, Dufour developed a composting system that involves a three-sided open-air building with three composting compartments and a big plastic bin underground to catch liquid residues. He installed the system on the property of a big horticultural nursery - La Pépinière Cramer in Les Cèdres - and convinced a half-dozen supermarket owners on the West Island to be part of a pilot project that began 15 months ago.

"We listened to him and crunched the numbers," said Daniel Vezina, co-owner of the Rochette & Vezina IGA in Île Perrot. "We concluded that it would save us money."

Vezina was paying \$1,000 a week to a large private waste-management company to empty the big bin behind his 50,000-square-foot store every two or three days. In addition to the pickup fee, which includes a base fee of \$110 per visit, a fuel fee of around \$15 and another \$11 per tonne in landfill fees (his store produces about four tonnes a week), Vezina also paid \$100 every week to have the putrid juices that spilled from the garbage container behind his store cleaned up.

Now he is paying Dufour a flat fee of \$25 per tonne to haul away his past-due vegetables and fruits - even the compostable waxed packing boxes the latter come in - in weekly pickups of a specially designed organic waste bin.

He figures the savings from Dufour's service will pay for the new bay door and compacting machine he needed to install within three years.

"That's a good rate of return," Vezina said. "We're thinking green and saving money."

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