

Vegetable waste next recycling target

Despite recycling programs, there are still tonnes of garbage tossed out every day from commercial establishments. Much of this waste is vegetable matter and one waste management entrepreneur thinks there may be a market for fuming it into livestock feed.

by Hugh Maynard

"Waste not, want not" is an old adage that has fallen on deaf ears in these, the consumer decades of the 20th century. Even as recycling programs for paper, plastic, glass and metal cans slowly begin to make a dent in the mountains of garbage, tonnes of waste continue to be disposed of daily, especially from commercial outlets.

Stephen Walsh wants to change as much of that as he can. He's a partner in a waste management company called "Encore" (a nifty acronym for environment, co-operation and recycling) that has contracts with hotels, shopping malls and restaurants.

"Our purpose is the management of garbage, rather than just throwing out what can't be recycled" says Walsh, who spent nearly two years researching the recycling industry and doing waste audits for a laboratory before setting out to take on the wasteland of Garbage disposal.

Le Faubourg, a trendy shopping mall on Ste-Catherine St. in Montreal, is one of Encore's waste management clients. Walsh has set up a collection system for recyclables with the boutiques, fast-food restaurants and food shops, as well as replacing garbage cans with separation containers in which consumers can place their soft drink cans, glass juice bottles and plastic plates.

Le Faubourg is saving a little money in dumping fees from reduced waste volume, but is getting most of As payback from a publicity program giving itself a Green' image to attract customers.

Even still, the mall generates 1-2 tonnes of garbage daily, half of which is vegetable matter from the restaurants and food stores, all of which is disposed of.

"Most of this is post-kitchen, not post-consumer, and we have to try and find an end market for this stuff" says Walsh, who is currently "feeling out the market" in order to take the management of waste one step further.

Alternatives

Composting is a method of recycling waste that is expanding rapidly, from back-yard mini-composters to large volume projects handling decomposable trash collected by municipalities.

But Walsh projects that the composting market will quickly become swamped, resulting in too many bags of composted organic matter for too few flower beds. He thinks that there will be little economic incentive for composting this type of waste once handling, processing and packaging costs are covered.

Secondly, Walsh believes that vegetable and bakery waste from stores and restaurants still has feed value and it should be used as such. Just one fruit and vegetable store in Le Faubourg, for example, after giving left-overs to food banks throws out a half tonne of trimmings and spoiled food a week. Cinemas regularly heave out a huge volume of uneaten and burnt popcorn Walsh notes. Multiply these sources by thousands of stores retailing food products and Walsh thinks that there is a ready supply of feed for farm livestock.

Transportation is the major limping factor, getting the waste from the cay out to the countryside. Encore is currently looking into this point, with the best option appearing to be the use of trucks that are resuming empty from deliveries into the cay. Another concern is what types of farms would be most interested in this kind of feed?

Cheap feed

Images of the proverbial "pigs at the trough" quickly come to mind, buckets of swill being eagerly lapped up amidst the squeals and grunts of the hungry herd. Well, livestock feeding has come a long way since the days of "All Creatures, Great and Small" and waste feed needs more management than just loading a trailer.

As with all recycling, separation will be essential, particularly where butchers and delicatessens are present. Farmers are forbidden by law to feed uncooked meat scraps to animals because they pass-on diseases to which humans are susceptible.

Vegetable matter is also bulky, mostly water but with high levels of protein, vitamins and minerals; this would be best suited for ruminants such as beef or sheep. Bakery products, on the other hand, are more dense in composition and high in starch, a better feed for pigs.

Consistency of supply and quality will also be a concern for certain farmers. Although dairy cattle would be readily able to utilize such feed, milk production can drop dramatically with a change in feed. Will the cheap cost of waste feed be able to compensate for the fluctuations in milk production?

Changes in the price of other livestock feeds could also be a problem. Grain corn is, in current dollars, as cheap as it's ever been. Plentiful sunshine throughout this summer has

meant that farmers are making good quality hay in abundance and that means lower prices for purchasers of the number one livestock feed in eastern Canada.

Nevertheless, waste feed from retail food outlets could have potential. Certain types of beef cattle, such as stockers, require large quantities of cheap feed with minimal nutritional requirements through the transition period before entering feedlots. In Quebec, the Beef Producers Federation has been requesting the provincial government to do something to encourage stocker production (so that more beef will be finished in Quebec for the Montreal market, Canada's largest), so a vegetable matter recycling program may work well in that type of context.

Unlike dairy cattle, which prefer a consistent ration with no surprises, goats (and to a lesser extent, sheep) like variety, a fancy which is hard to please in the middle of winter with only baled hay on hand. Although the goat and lamb markets are small compared to beef, with a rising ethnic population across the country they have potential, especially if waste feed makes them competitive as a staple and not just as a celebration treat.

Which is just what Stephen Walsh is looking for, ways to convert what is now waste into wanted food. Any bites?

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