

Business keeps worms 'fat, dumb and happy'

Jim Stinson • Staff writer • October 8, 2010

Tom Herlihy's business in Avon is taking off, mostly because he has millions of workers he doesn't pay.

They are earthworms, and their only job is to feed on the 10 million pounds of solid cow manure that come to Herlihy at the farm space he leases on Jenks Road.

The worms add value to the microbe-treated dung, and then Herlihy and his company, Worm Power, sell the resulting fertilizer to golf courses and greenhouses.

"We work for the worms," Herlihy said Thursday while leading a tour that included federal agricultural officials. "Our job is to keep them fat, dumb and happy."

Herlihy and Worm Power have stepped up their business, going from 300,000 pounds of fertilizer produced last year and early this year to a planned 2.5 million pounds of product in 2011. He declined to specify revenues.

His 40 customers are in 17 states. They like the effectiveness and organic quality of the material, Herlihy said. So does the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which has made \$410,000 in grants to Worm Power. On Thursday, the Department of Agriculture sent one of its top scientists, Roger Beachy, to the Livingston County farm.

Beachy is head of the USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture. Charles F. Cleland, the institute's national program leader, was also on hand to watch Herlihy show off his 18 new worm beds. Each bed can hold up to 3 million worms.

Beachy said one of the problems presented by large dairy farms, like the one that Worm Power leases land from, is the tons of manure they produce.

While the cows' liquid manure can be used on fields almost immediately, the solid waste has to be moved to lagoons, which could leak into waterways.

The worms' involvement, however, safely treats the solid manure and adds value to the waste as a fertilizer, Beachy said.

"And it has great disease suppression abilities," said Cleland. "A superior product."

Herlihy, who lives in Geneseo, said about 40 percent of Worm Power's grants go to Cornell University researchers who assist his company in scientific examination of the process.

The manure is treated with microbes before the worms get it, and Herlihy said that is to remove by heat — as high as 160 degrees — any harmful items in the manure.

Allison Jack, a Cornell doctoral student, said that such worm-powered composting, or "vermicomposting," has the potential to protect crops from disease, an organic alternative to chemical-based pesticides, and a natural tool to fight nasty plant infections caused by pathogens such as *Pythium aphanidermatum*.

"I see this as the next frontier in bio control," said Jack.

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Howie Jamison, officially the head facility manager and unofficially the head worm wrangler at Worm Power, shows off some of the worms at the composting facility in Avon. (WILL YURMAN staff photographer)



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At left, Roger Beachy, head of the National Institute of Food and Agriculture, with Worm Power CEO Tom Herlihy. The company received funding to expand earthworm composting. (WILL YURMAN staff photographer)

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