Compost markets: Are they there?

Definitely. But compost-marketing opportunities depend upon the type and quality of the product.

By Jean Bonhotal

In the Northeast, sale prices for manure-based compost range from $8 to $35 per yard. Product management and quality, market proximity, type of livestock, bag or bulk sales, and marketing skills account for the price variance.

But how much a dairy makes by selling compost is only one economic return. A dairy may realize even greater economic benefit from cutting manure handling and spreading costs and from better management of nutrients and odor.

Decide on compost type

If your nutrient management plan includes composting, first decide how the compost will be used or sold. Do you want to sell product for nursery use, turf, vineyards, vegetable crops, roadside erosion control, on-farm, landfill cover or other uses? Options are almost unlimited.

Greenhouses and nursery operations require higher quality composts. And though this market pays more, it's also a high-risk outlet. If the product's nutrients and composition aren't what you claim them to be, you could be liable for plant damage.

Other markets are more forgiving. Turf, field crops and roadside erosion control can use compost that isn't quite stable and has higher levels of some nutrients than what other markets want.

Compost for specific crops may not be as demanding as the horticultural market, but these users will want a good analysis of nutrient composition and possible presence of heavy metals to match compost with crop requirements. Many dairies believe they can make more money selling bagged compost to the home-gardener market. To cover the cost of making this compost product, you need to sell a 30- to 50- pound bag for $3 to $5. Competition is intense in the home-gardener market and even though farm compost may be a better product, it's easy to buy bags of other compost for $1 to $2 per 30- to 50-pound bags.

The stable product required for bagged compost will cost you more to produce. You'll need screening and bagging equipment, and a place to keep the finished product dry for screening.

Markets may want more than one product. Cooperating with a neighboring dairy may be one of the best ways to meet the demand for product variety since all dairy manure has different properties.

With funding in part from the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority, the Cornell Waste Management Institute is working with Woods End Research Laboratory of Mt. Vernon, Maine, to sample and analyze composted manure produced on 30 farms. The results will give farms a good picture of the assets of their composted products for more effective marketing. ■

Many dairies think they can make more money by selling bagged compost to the home-gardener market. That may be true, but it's a highly competitive market.

Thinking about compost?

1. Learn how to compost. Get publications such as Farm-based Composting: Manure and More.

2. Find out what it costs to compost. Use the Co-composter tool for rough estimates.

3. Determine a market. Local contacts and the Cornell Waste Management Institute (CWMI) website to locate other composting operations.

4. Evaluate your site. Use a comprehensive nutrient management planner and an engineer.

5. Have more questions? Contact Jean Bonhotal with CWMI.

FYI

- Jean Bonhotal is a composting specialist with the Cornell Waste Management Institute. Reach her at (607) 255-8444. E-mail: jb29@cornell.edu
- Visit the Cornell Waste Management Institute (CWMI) website: www.cfe.cornell.edu/compost/Composting_homepage.html
- For help in making composting decisions, see the "Co-composter" tool at www.cfe.cornell.edu/wmi/Compost/CoCompost.html.
- The Woods End Research Laboratory website is info@woodsend.org
- Other composting resources: "On-Farm Compost Handbook" (NRAES -54) and video "Farm-based Composting: Manure and More" (NRAES-150).