

Callie Martin
June 2009
Skagit Valley Herald
“Spoils to Soil”

Communities in Skagit County are teaming up to reduce greenhouse gases, and the first place some of them are turning is the garbage can. In the United States, biodegradable wastes make up almost half of all solid waste generated. That might be acceptable if those apple cores and paper plates were decomposing in nature, but in a landfill rot takes on a different character. Compacted and later sealed like a mummy, trash in a landfill decomposes without the benefit of rainfall, sunshine or oxygen making degradation take decades or centuries slower. One estimate compiled by Archeology Professor William Rathje at the University of Arizona discovered legible newspapers more than 15 years old, while studies on food waste showed only a 50% degradation over 20 year periods.

Mummified trash decomposes without the aide of oxygen, making the process of decay *anaerobic*. This produces significant amounts of methane (CH₄), a greenhouse gas 20 times more potent than carbon dioxide (CO₂). Landfills are the number one source of human-related methane emissions in the United States, beating out the methane produced by cows. Some landfill operators “harvest” this methane output from the landfills to produce electricity, but often methane is more of a nuisance than a resource. Combustible and causing of respiratory distress, methane poses both safety and health hazards.

Composting is an environmentally-friendly alternative to anaerobic landfill decomposition. Methane is produced during both oxygenated and non-oxygenated forms of decay but minimal methane is produced when composting, because the oxygenated or *aerobic* process eats away nearly all of it.

So when it comes to furling our emissions into a manageable package, curbing methane production is a big motive for Craig Culmbach co-owner and operator of Skagit Soils our local commercial composting facility. At Skagit Soils food scraps and yard waste are turned back into nutrient rich soil.

Composting has multiple benefits, “From the environmental standpoint we can reduce the carbon footprint for all of Skagit County by diverting food scraps from the landfill into our composting facility,” said Craig, “From the economic standpoint the organics that are removed from the garbage stream are being processed locally and used as an ingredient in a product that is sold locally. Also restaurants that recycle their organics could see a savings since the cost of the organics dumpster is less than the garbage dumpsters.”

Realizing the benefits of composting in a time when both the economy and sustainability are key Skagit Soils decided to join forces with Waste Management to create the Skagit Green Team. Cooperation between the two companies facilitates the hauling of food waste to the local composting facility. Edison Elementary, Nell Thorn Restaurant & Pub in La Conner and Village Pizza in Anacortes are among the first to take full advantage of both the economic and environmental savings by composting food and paper waste. And momentum is growing. Earlier this month, restaurants and business owners met with Skagit Green Team in La Conner at Seeds restaurant to discuss the

feasibility of composting their organic scraps. Joan Tezak, director of the Anacortes Arts and Crafts Festival is also leaping into greener pastures this August 7th, 8th and 9th with increased bottle and can recycling as well as contracting with the Skagit Green Team to collect all of the Festival's food waste. The left over grease from the Festival fry vendors will be picked up by a biofuels coop. Joan has written a letter to food vendors asking them to use biodegradables, like paper plates, as much as possible. Joan hopes to set a high standard, "We will need the cooperation of both festival goers and vendors," she said. The Festival plans to have a group of volunteers monitoring the compost, recycling, and garbage stations, helping people to place the right material into the right collection bin to avoid contamination. This is a giant step for a local festival that draws in nearly 40,000 people and artists from around the northwest. For Joan, it was a simple choice of economic incentive, "We hope that this is only the beginning of reducing a \$4,500.00 garbage bill. We are moving towards green this summer, come and be a part of the activities!" she added with pizzazz.

Culmback believes a paradigm shift of coming, "I remember when I was a young kid we threw everything in the garbage, tin cans, glass jars, plastic. Now I don't think I could bring myself to throw a can or jar in the garbage. That is how it will be with organics recycling; the garbage can will be the alternative,"