

Composting and current UK regulations

The entire waste management industry is currently in a state of virtual paralysis with regard to composting.

The Department of the Environment says that composting of municipal organic waste is "a vital component of meeting Waste Strategy targets" and that "The Government supports the composting of waste". (DEFRA Briefing note on compost June 2001). Yet its regulatory body, the Environment Agency, will not currently permit compost derived from kitchen waste to be used in the open and has made it virtually impossible for new composting initiatives to gain a licence.

As a consequence local authorities and waste companies are turning to incineration to get organic waste out of landfill sites. This is totally nonsensical. Incinerators release many chemicals with potentially severe health impacts in stack gases and in ashes. Food waste, mixed with all manner of other materials is dumped in huge bunkers where it can remain rotting for days. Kitchen waste is a very poor material to burn - it is very wet and has a low calorific value. The organic material should be going back into the soil where it can return nutrients, carbon and improve soil texture. Compost has a high environmental value. It also has a potentially high economic value, but not until the Government sorts out the mess it has made.

The National Trust has been effectively stopped in its tracks from developing the comprehensive composting program it planned (Guardian 01.05.02, Telegraph 02.05.02). The National Trust is a huge generator of organic waste. It owns 612,000 acres of countryside in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, almost 600 miles of coastline and more than 200 buildings and gardens. It is desperately trying to do the right thing environmentally with its waste, but it is being barred from doing so by ill conceived Government policy.

Waste companies too have frozen many millions of pounds worth of investment as a result of uncertainties the Government has created around what can be done with compost produced from domestic waste. And local authorities, despite a desperate need to divert biodegradable waste from landfill, are having to turn away from composting.

The problem is arising for two reasons. The Environment Agency have determined that composting "has the potential to harm the health of humans situated for long periods within 250 metres of composting operations". Although the EA also state that "under properly controlled conditions...composting is an acceptable form of managing waste and provides a useful means of recovering biodegradable waste to produce a humus-like material" (Agency Position on Composting and Health Effects 13 August 2001), it is making it very difficult to for anyone to get a licence for any new composting facility.

The second problem comes from the Animal By-Products Order 1999, as amended in 2001. The 2001 amendment was meant to prevent catering wastes being used in animal feeds (in response to the Foot and Mouth outbreak). It prohibits compost derived from "catering waste" from being used on land where animals may have access. The EA has interpreted the regulation to mean there can be no use of kitchen waste anywhere wild birds can access. It has also become apparent, though this was not the intention of the Regulation, that "catering waste" includes domestic kitchen waste.

This means that there is virtually nothing waste authorities can do with compost that contains kitchen waste – even high quality source separated material – apart from landfilling or incinerating it.

Meanwhile the Institute of Wastes Management and others are expressing concerns that the UK may not meet the Landfill Directive targets. A situation which could incur fines of £120 million per day.

Composting can be carried out safely. Modern systems, particularly in-vessel composters can if required achieve temperatures of over 70C - enough to kill virtually all potentially problematic microbes - and the product can be tested to meet stringent requirements before use.

Of course a degree of precaution is a good thing. The impending EU Animal By-Products Regulation provides this. It sets the conditions under which compost can be produced and used. But this legislation has been delayed and will not be in force until at least 2003.

There is a potentially huge market for compost derived from domestic kitchen and garden waste. Depending on its quality can be used in horticulture and agriculture, as a soil conditioner, a peat substitute, for landscaping, soil improvement at roadsides and embankments, brown-field site remediation and daily landfill cover. The EA is currently blocking all of these uses and the Government has not set standards for any of them.

The Government position is currently laid out in a briefing note:

"The Government strongly supports the composting of waste, this is a vital component of meeting the Waste Strategy targets for recycling and composting and targets under the Landfill Directive to reduce the landfilling of biodegradable municipal waste...Where catering or household waste contains meat or other products derived from animals then, although it may be composted, it may not, currently, be used on land. The Animal By-Products Order prohibits the use of this mixed compost on land where animals (including wild birds) may have access. However, this position is set to change. The draft EU Regulation on Animal By -Products will allow the use of properly composted mixed waste on all land except pasture land. We expect this Regulation to come into force in the Spring of 2002."

(Note the Regulation has been delayed and "it now seems likely that it will apply in the first half of 2003". Letter from DEFRA 17 April 2002)

What the Government should do is rescind the badly thought out, hastily implemented Animal By-products order and allow composting of domestic kitchen waste on the same terms as outlined in the forthcoming EU Directive. The parts of this Directive related to composting are finalised and agreed. Implementing its content early in the UK would allow composting to go ahead and prevent the rush towards less sustainable alternatives that is currently taking place.