



Sally Brown

Climate Change Connections

COMPOST SECURITY

A FEW months ago, I wrote a column talking about how accomplished I felt, how much good had happened for organics reuse over the last few years. I'm starting to think that I should have kept my mouth shut. We had that big victory in Florida, where the Governor refuses to yield on a legislative overturn of the yard waste disposal ban. Since that column, the state legislature overturned the governor's veto. A recent email from Iowa, where yet again, a report is suggesting that landfills are best. Word from Boston that a large and influential landfill company is making strides towards getting control of organics.

And then biosolids, just breaking my heart. I spent two days in January in talks with biosolids folks in California. Here, six ecoterrorists have the City of San Francisco quaking in its boots, leading officials to stop a compost giveaway program that was making hundreds happy. And in southern California, the City of Los Angeles is lauded as environmental stewards because they are pumping biosolids miles underground.

I know this column is supposed to be about organics and greenhouse gases (GHGs), but events of the last few months have convinced me that it has to be broader for these trends to be reversed. While I've talked about ways to maximize carbon sequestration with compost and biosolids and quoted lots of scientific papers, it appears these considerations are just one part of a larger discussion.

Often those arguing for landfilling are able to cite the one or two studies that have identified the perfect landfill or failed to consider the benefits associated with use of compost to make their argument. Science is an imperfect process with enough journals out there and enough time required to reach a consensus that those involved in recycling organics can't, at this point, count on the science of GHG emissions alone to definitively make their case. This is even truer when you consider that many decision

makers don't spend much of their time reading scientific papers. Money, public opinion, and money are the real drivers.

ORGANICS TO SOILS, TAKE 2

So I am going to suggest an alternative strategy to keep organics out of landfills. I am by trade a scientist, and I went into this trade thinking that science would provide real, rock solid answers. And it may in time, but for the moment, I think an interim strategy may make the difference. We need to make customers and city planners realize that compost is like Social Security for soils, for communities and for municipal infrastructure. Even in the last election when cutting government spending was better than a date with the homecoming queen on a Saturday night, everybody wanted to keep their Social Security. You may even remember how well the Republicans fared



The main reason people will insist on organic soil products is because of their efficacy, as witnessed in photos above — compost-amended on left, and control with no compost on right.

with their attempt to privatize Social Security. People like Social Security because they have come to depend on it and they know it is a really helpful safety net — not all that you need, but with it at least you can pay some of the bills.

As a scientist, I can tell you that the same is true for compost and other organic amendments. It won't solve all our environmental problems but it will make a healthy dent. Now we have to make this clear to the general public. Even better is to make it clear to the general public with locally produced materials so that you can also develop pride in product and brand loyalty. Let me explain what I'm getting at here.

For your customers, the best part about compost is not that you conserve GHGs or nutrients, or that you sequester carbon in soils, or prevent the release of GHG from landfills. The best part of compost or other organics is that

they work wonders for a wide range of soil applications. Composts and biosolids make plants grow like no fertilizers can. They also bring disturbed sites back to life faster and more effectively than any other alternative. Composts and biosolids soil products offer cost-effective and sustainable alternatives to engineered solutions for storm water management — in the transportation industry (highway right of ways), on top of buildings (green roofs), on city streets (bioswales and rain gardens) and in new construction sites (both during and post construction to establish lawns and gardens). In other words, for a wide range of applications, composts and biosolids soil products offer not only the best option, they offer an option that is also cost-effective and sustainable.

Demonstrate this on a local level to a wide range of customers including homeowners, municipal managers, transportation agencies, parks departments and farmers. And demonstrate using with locally made and branded products. Then just let anyone try to take these products away. When I was growing up one of the featured ads was "I want my Maypo." This needs to be replaced with "I want my 'Tagro' or 'GroCo'" or any other local compost brand.

If a broad public outreach is made with products that smell reasonable, are not contaminated with plastic and have sufficient nutrient content — and not just to one sector but to a broad range of potential clients — products will move. Good products need to be brought to a broader audience accompanied by the information and educational materials on how to use them properly. Once this is done and these products are allowed to show their stuff, it will get exceedingly difficult to take away the feedstocks used to make them.

The main reason that people will insist on organic soil products is because of their efficacy. Local is nice, GHG friendly is nice, readily available is good. But efficacy is the most important. Demonstrate this, and then put the GHG icing on the cake. ■

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