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Compost Gets High Marks for Fertility, Economy

A partnership that began as an experiment is winning kudos, as the TCEQ and TxDOT demonstrate that even a little compost can go a long way.

In this story:

Sidebar: The Primary Uses of Compost

What began as a recycling experiment between two state agencies has grown into a successful partnership with a national reputation.

The TCEQ and the Texas Department of Transportation are turning compost into a valued commodity, and other parts of the country want to know how they do it.

The agencies teamed up in 1995 to determine whether organic matter could quickly establish vegetation and prevent erosion. Impressive results from trial runs led to large-scale projects of revegetating highway rights-of-way. Today, Texas is a national leader in producing and using compost.

"At first, we were looking to help cities that were producing compost and mulch but did not have local markets for their finished products," recalled the TCEQ's Scott McCoy, who worked in consultation with Barrie Cogburn, a landscape architect with TxDOT.



After seeing how steep slopes sprayed with compost-manufactured topsoil sprouted into expanses of thick grass, some TxDOT engineers started placing orders. As compost proved to be cheaper and more effective than traditional erosion controls, "that's when things started rolling," McCoy said.

The compost itself is derived primarily from cow manure, composted yard trimmings, or biosolids. The successful topsoil blend is one-quarter compost to three-quarters topsoil.

Since fiscal 2001, TxDOT has purchased or made plans to purchase more than 852,000 cubic yards of the material statewide, buying from 15 to 20 commercial composters. Spending in fiscal 2003 alone totaled \$544,600.

The TCEQ has spearheaded getting the word out to the public and private sectors by holding workshops and demonstrations around the state, with funding provided by the Environmental Protection Agency under the Nonpoint Source Grant Program. Now, composting has even become a means of assisting one rural area with water quality problems (see sidebar).

Following TxDOT's example, many cities, counties, school districts, and universities are buying compost for parks, athletic fields, and golf courses. Private developers have turned to the organic material to prevent erosion at construction sites and to help establish vegetation in new subdivisions.

The TCEQ has approved compost applications as "best management practices" to be used not only by TxDOT but also by local governments and the construction industry in pollution prevention plans for storm water permits.

Now widely recognized as composting experts, McCoy and Cogburn speak at environmental and transportation conferences around the country and receive inquiries from as far away as Mexico and Canada. The TCEQ and TxDOT have received several awards from national organizations focused on highway building and safety.

For information on compost demonstrations scheduled at various locations, contact McCoy at 512/239-6774 or at SMcCoy@tceq.texas.gov.

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The Primary Uses of Compost

Erosion control. A half-and-half blend of compost and wood chips is sprayed on slopes to control erosion, while also amending the soil with nutrients. Grass seed can be applied at the same time.

General use compost. This all-compost product is used mostly as a soil amendment or surface cover for revegetation, or for enriching landscape planting beds. It can also be applied on established turf as top dressing in place of fertilizer applications.

Compost-manufactured topsoil. Compost that is premixed or incorporated on site as one-quarter of the soil creates a highly enriched topsoil for establishing vegetation.

Erosion control logs and filter berms. Mesh tubes filled with compost and wood chips form a stable "log" that prevents runoff at construction sites. When building concludes, each tube is slit and the contents are left to nourish the soil. Yet another device, filter berms made from compost or mulch are an alternative to silt fences and hay bales. The mounds are dense enough to hold their shape, yet porous enough to allow water (but not debris) to move through and into storm drains.

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