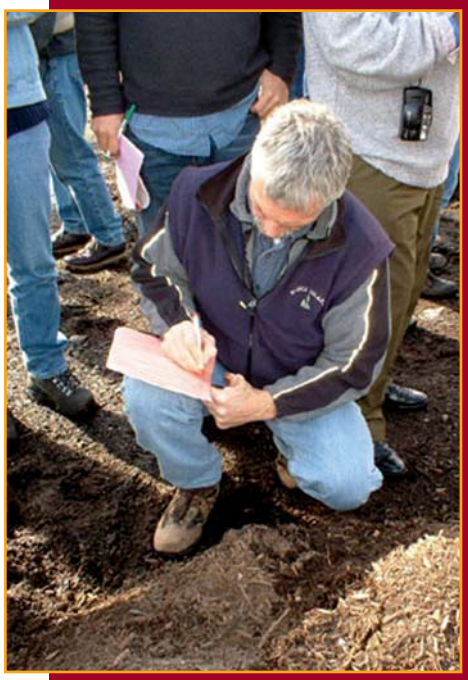
COMPOSTING

THE QUALITY OF NEW YORK STATE AGRICULTURAL COMPOST PRODUCTS

CWMI staff conduct field work to examine the quality of agricultural compost.



Understanding the characteristics of compost are important when choosing an end use.

Tradeoffs often take place between management practices and compost characteristics.

OBJECTIVES

- Develop guidance for compost use to assist agricultural composters in providing this information to their customers.
- Work with interested stakeholders in the development of an implementable program to improve quality assurance of agricultural compost.

OVERVIEW

Cornell Waste Management Institute (CWMI), with NYSERDA funding, investigated the qualities and characteristics of New York State composts. Investigators explored the potential for a label or seal of quality program that would help consumers identify quality composts. CWMI looked at the available consumer use guidelines and found inconsistencies among the few that exist. In addition, CWMI examined policy issues relating to compost producers having limited ability to provide information about their product to consumers. Currently, State fertilizer rules prohibit a product from stating nutrient content unless it meets fertilizer regulations.

OUTCOME

Samples were collected from 30 dairy and poultry farm composts to obtain physical, chemical and microbiologic characteristics. Supplemental data were collected to determine effects on compost quality, including: type of manure (separated, unseparated dairy manures or poultry); turning method (bucket-turned, windrow turners, passively aerated); turning frequency, composting pad type, and screen use.

Many parameters examined reflected conditions, practices, and processes unique to each facility. Trade-offs often took place. Enhancing one attribute caused another to diminish, indicating there is no single “best” method for composting. For example, frequent turning resulted in low weed seeds, high maturity, low organic matter and low Total Kjeldahl Nitrogen (TKN), but less turning translated to higher weed seeds, lower maturity, higher organic matter and higher TKN.

Copies of the final report for this project are available free of charge at the Cornell Waste Management Institute web site.

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