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READER'S FORUM

Composting pilot program can combat climate change

By John Montgomery Aug 12, 2018

A staggering \$160 billion worth of produce gets added to the landfill each year in the United States, whether this is the spiky armor on that delicious pineapple or the misshapen zucchini a grocery store doesn't sell. This is tragic from the start, but rotting food also contributes to climate change. A recent study conducted by the Natural Resources Defense Council found that despite the vast amount of energy, water and land used to get our food from the farm to our plates, we end up throwing away almost half of it.

This May, Athens approved a six-month pilot program for the curbside pickup of compostable materials at no cost to participants. The program is organized by the city of Athens, with the help of Rural Action, a local organization dedicated to sustainable development, and Athens-Hocking Organics, a part of Athens-Hocking Recycling Centers, Inc., who are committed to reducing waste. The pilot will run from August 2018 to January 2019, and will serve 727 residents in 265 households, hoping to increase the sustainability of their homes and the community.

If successful, Athens could be the second city in the state of Ohio to adopt a curbside compost program. The northern Ohio city of Huron began its pilot program in 2009. Huron's pilot successfully grew into a citywide program that collects food and yard waste, and the city, which is similar in size to Athens, has diverted a third of its waste stream from the landfill.

Other Midwestern cities' curbside collection services, such as Milwaukee's Compost Crusader and Minneapolis' Clean City program, give Athens confidence that successful curbside programs are possible. These curbside compost programs need just a few things in order to thrive: convenience, educational resources, accessibility, reduction of landfill and trash costs, and a cost structure that incentivizes composting and discourages landfilling.

Backyard and garden composting generally has participation rates of only about 16 percent. However, of the residents who do not compost, more than two thirds express a strong desire to do so – if the process was made simpler or more accessible. With a convenient pickup program, those rates could quadruple, according to a study commissioned by the National Waste & Recycling Association.

Many residents who have signed up for the Athens pilot program have expressed this sentiment. Many participants explained they have been interested in trying composting for a while, and this is a great way to learn how.

The curbside convenience of the program is what helped many participants decide to take the plunge and start composting this August. More than 50 percent of pilot participants do not currently compost, so the program significantly increases compost rates in the city.

Curbside pickup programs result in the highest participation in composting programs, and, as a result, the greatest climate benefits. The Athens pilot could result in a net reduction of greenhouse gases, even considering the impacts of the pickup. This is why Rural Action has opted to support the city in rolling out a pilot curbside pickup program.

Arguably, the most important effect of widespread composting is the amount of waste it can divert from landfills, which radically reduces the amount of methane being released into the environment. According to an IPCC report (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change), methane is one of the most potent greenhouse gases. The estimated benefits of Athens' pilot program will translate into a decrease in greenhouse gas emissions equivalent to planting 113 trees every week or avoiding the consumption of 133 gallons of gasoline per week.

A curbside compost program for Athens can help fight climate change. Composting will help the city meet its Sustainability Action Plan goals, one of which is to increase the waste diversion rate to 50 percent by 2020. Ultimately, this program could help Athens reach these goals, and contribute to a healthier climate as well.

Editor's note: John Montgomery is the Zero Waste communications intern at Rural Action. He is a recent graduate of Ohio University with a bachelor's degree in environmental health.