

## COMPOST USERS FORUM



San Jose compost is spread on turfgrass at a soccer field which "had a surface like concrete."

# Increasing Government Purchase Of Compost Products

A turf grass comeback at a soccer field gives momentum to policies designed to boost compost sales by city agencies.

Michele Young and Karin Grobe

**A**S San Jose, California rapidly nears a population of one million, the Environmental Services Department continues to stress increased diversion rates through a policy of "Highest and Best Use" that encourages composting and strong markets. This policy is expressed through collection and pro-

cessing contract provisions, a city-sponsored market research and outreach program, and support for increased government purchase of compost products.

San Jose collects and processes approximately 130,000 tons/year of yard trimmings from over 200,000 single and multifamily households.

Collection contracts with BFI and Green Waste Recovery and processing contracts with BFI and Zanker Road Resource Management contain provisions that help expand markets for finished compost. San Jose yard trimmings may not be used as alternative daily cover with the exception of processing residue and ground palm fronds. Materials can only be processed into accepted products which include compost, wood and fiber mulch, green soil amendment, cogeneration fuel, and animal bedding. An incentive price is also paid by the city for finished compost. Contractors provide 1,800 tons of free compost and wood chips per year for municipal projects, and they are responsible for marketing the balance of all yard trimmings products.

These provisions have created a scenario where approximately 90 percent of all San Jose material collected is processed into finished compost. City departments are seeing the benefits of finished compost through free application of material, and a competitive market is being created for amendment materials.

### Partnership Programs

San Jose created the Agriculture in Partnership program in 1993 to support compost research and outreach and the marketing efforts of the processors. The program is implemented through collaboration with the University of California Cooperative Extension, County Agriculture Advisor, and the U.S. Composting Council. As the focus

broadened to include landscapers in 1999, the program was expanded to become From the Ground Up. Current efforts are outlined below.

New programs will include strategies to get municipal agencies to purchase more of the city's material. San Jose's Transportation and Environment Committee recently adopted a City-Wide Recycled Product Procurement Policy which includes compost in its scope of materials. Yard trimmings contract managers and representatives from the Purchasing and General Services Departments are preparing specifications for compost purchase.

Two of the largest departments already have open purchase orders with the city's processors. open purchase orders allow departments to make multiple purchases until the money is spent. Once established, they become the precedent and are quite easy to renew (i.e., add money to). These buying documents put the purchase decisions in the hands of the user department, so they can organize deliveries whenever they need the material.

Because compost specifications are in development, the purchase orders have been based loosely on compost quality provisions in the city's processing contracts (e.g., meeting PFRP, lab testing, etc.) The goal is to increase the total tonnage purchased by more City departments in order to get the best volume price. To date, nearly 2,000 cy of compost have been procured through city purchase orders. (Purchasing agents are not clear how much is being purchased through private transactions with soil yards). The demand for compost has increased for city projects every year.

Future plans to increase purchase of compost products by local government agencies include expansion of purchasing policies with specifications for compost purchases, and increased use of open purchase orders for all departments

that use compost. There will also be increased demonstration of compost benefits in government applications such as turf management and weed abatement.

### Potent Lesson In Turfgrass Comeback

As an example of how the city's From The Ground Up works to convince skeptical buyers, compost made at Zanker's Z-Best facility in San Jose was used on turf grass at the Creekside Soccer Complex in Cupertino. The grass was in poor condition when the city of Cupertino contacted Moyer Consulting Group in August, 1998. "By the time I was called in, the fields had lost 30 to 40 percent of their turf," says David Moyer, principal architect of the field remediation. "The turf had been compacted to 95 percent and had a surface like concrete. Drainage was definitely not working, and the pH was alkaline. I wasn't sure whether I could bring the turf back or not, but I decided it was worth a try."

To open up the physical structure of the soil, the fields were core aerified. Cores were removed and 200 tons of Z-Best Landscape Compost were applied at a rate of 2 cy/1,000 sq. ft. (88 cy/acre). Depth of the compost was approximately 2/3 inch. Areas of the field that were completely devoid of live turf were drill seeded. "The compost served as a wonderful seedbed," adds Moyer.

His aim was to build a six-inch root zone for the turfgrass. "I think of turf as a crop that I manage," he says. "If I provide what the crop needs, it will thrive." The remediation program was successful, and Moyer's belief in compost was

buoyed. The fields are now on an annual maintenance plan that includes core aerification and top dressing with compost. Aerification opens up spaces for the compost to penetrate, and helps to control thatch. After compost application, fields are dragged with a screen and heavily watered.

Management of turfgrass has become more input intensive in recent



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years in response to increased use of sports fields, according to Moyer. "Turf grass management used to be a passive affair—just fertilize and mow," he says. "But over the past few years, we have seen a tremendous increase in sport use by women and youth. We need to maintain the turf at a high level so it can handle the increased sports traffic." ■

*Michele Young is with the San Jose Environmental Services Department. Karin Grobe, who directs Organic Recyclers Anonymous is outreach coordinator for From The Ground Up. The website address for From The Ground Up is [www.urbancompost.org](http://www.urbancompost.org).*

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