

Environment

SEEDS gets grant dollars to study composting's future in northern Michigan

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Food waste sits in a compost station outside of Oryana Community Co-op in Traverse City on Wednesday.

Record-Eagle/Mike Krebs

TRAVERSE CITY — A local nonprofit group will dig up details about future composting opportunities in northern Michigan as part of a state recycling program.

SEEDS Ecology and Nature Centers this week received a \$75,000 state grant through the Renew Michigan program to study organic materials recycling — aka composting — in an effort to optimize systems for the 10-county region.

“We’re doing a feasibility study that hopefully can lead to some viable enterprises,” said Sarna Salzman, the nonprofit’s executive director.

The state grant dollars will be used together with a similar \$75,000 grant from Rotary Charities to fund a collaborative feasibility study.

The end goal is the kind of systems change outcome Rotary seeks to support in an effort to target the root of complex problems, said Becky Ewing, Rotary's executive director.

"It really is that durable change we are looking for," she said.

Salzman said the goal is to find ways to encourage more people to pull materials that can be composted from their waste stream that goes to landfills. Instead, sending those items into an organics recycling system could "turn it back into soil," she said.

"It's typically the wet stuff that contaminates other recyclables, like cardboard and plastics," Salzman said.

Materials that can be composted include food, wood and paper products, and she said studies show removal of these organic materials from landfills will reduce the development of landfill methane, a powerful greenhouse gas scientifically connected to climate change. Instead, carbon in such compostable materials is recycled back into the soil rather than sent into the atmosphere, she said.

The end results could mean a cleaner stream of recyclable materials, and less of a negative impact on the atmosphere from landfill gases, Salzman said.

The composting feasibility study will focus on Antrim, Benzie, Charlevoix, Emmet, Grand Traverse, Kalkaska, Leelanau, Manistee, Missaukee and Wexford counties. It's estimated organic materials make up as much as one-third of the region's waste stream, Salzman said.

Statistics show Michigan sends to landfills 6.8 million tons of material that could be recycled, and she said recovering just 2.7 million tons of that could generate \$9 billion in potential annual labor income and \$33 billion in potential economic output.

Hopefully the study will uncover ways to use the market to inspire this type of behavioral change, Salzman said, perhaps even paying people to compost.

“We are looking at the entire value-chain — from the person who tosses out the banana peel to the person who hauls it away to the people who compost it and those who sell it to farmers and gardeners — searching for market-driven mechanisms to build upon what is already working, as well as opportunities that create new triple-bottom-line enterprises,” she said.

Environmental advocates argue Michigan has gaps in the current recycling chain: access to recycling, comprehensive collection and sorting, material processing, robust end markets, and innovative recycled-content manufacturing.

State Sen. Wayne Schmidt said he was proud to vote in favor of new funding to support recycling throughout the state. He said now more than ever Michigan residents view recycling as an essential public service.

“And during a time of social distancing because of COVID-19, when many nonessential employees are working remotely and commercial recycling is near an all-time low due to the coronavirus pandemic, producers see residential recycling programs as a critical part in the manufacturing supply chain so they can make their products from recycled content instead of new materials,” Schmidt said in a released statement.

Other entities that received state recycling program grants include:

- Great Lakes Tissue of Cheboygan, \$250,000 for technology that will recycle more types of containers into paper products;
- GFL Environmental of Traverse City, \$100,000 for technology needed for cart and cup recycling;
- The Northeast Michigan Council of Governments, \$55,000 to support collaborative efforts to secure a new recycling processing facility for the region;
- Emmet County, \$150,000 for expansion of the food scraps collection program;
- Delta Solid Waste Management Authority, \$600,000 for equipment needed to take advantage of the new recycling facility in Marquette that was built through a previous state grant;
- Three Upper Peninsula townships (Ishpeming/Negunee/Marquette Charter), \$167,791 for residential recycling carts for residents of those townships with materials going to the new recycling facility in Marquette;
- Keeweenaw Bay Indian Community, \$20,000 for equipment to collect paper and cardboard needed by Michigan businesses like U.P. Paper; and,
- City of Alpena, \$58,080 for recycling bins in public parks and government buildings.