

Maine needs to compost a lot more

BY CHRISTOPHER BURNS
BDN STAFF

It should come as no surprise that Mainers, like most Americans, throw away more food than anything else. But no widespread effort has taken hold in Maine to divert more food and organics from landfills and incinerators.

About 43 percent of what Mainers send to landfills and incinerators is compostable, according to a 2011 study by the University of Maine School of Economics. Two-thirds of that is food.

“Food scraps pose a major challenge for landfills because they take up a lot of space, they are very heavy and very wet,” said Mark King, an environmental specialist with the Sustainability Division of the Maine Department of Environmental Protection.

Of the 1.18 million tons of waste Mainers generated in 2014, more than 450,000 could have been composted, according to the Department of Environmental Protection’s latest waste generation report. But Mainers composted only 23,627 tons of organics. (These figures don’t capture the amount of organics composted in Mainers’ backyards.)

This figure was double the amount Mainers composted in 2013, but with landfill space becoming an increasingly precious commodity, the state and municipalities must grow the infrastructure needed to divert more waste away from landfills.

If enough organics, such as food scraps, could be diverted to composting facilities before reaching landfills, Maine could easily reach its 50 percent recycling goal, set in 1989, and extend its landfills’ lifespan.

“It’s the next big item in the waste stream,” said Kevin Roche, general manager of the waste-to-energy and recycling cooperative eomaine. “If we’re ever going to meet our recycling goal, we need to tackle organics.”

The ‘ick’ factor

But the infrastructure needed to kickstart greater composting will need to be built almost from scratch. Only 14 facilities across the state are licensed by the Department of Environmental Protection to compost food scraps for use as soil additives.

Most of the existing compost infrastructure is located in southern and coastal Maine. For the most part, composting on a commercial scale has yet to take off north of the Portland area, although some towns such as Skowhegan are slowly building out programs.

One of the reasons for the slow adoption is what Roche calls the “ick factor.” It doesn’t take long for food scraps to start breaking down and give off odors and attract fruit flies, making storing that food for compost an unpleasant task.

“We have to find a way to resolve the ‘ick factor’ because if we really want to maximize the recovery of food waste, we need to make it easy for people and businesses,” Roche said.

Education, Roche said, would have to be part of a successful composting effort. The message would have to get out that freezing compostable waste, wrapping it with paper or layering it with yard debris can mitigate the ick.

But that’s not the only problem facing large-scale composting: the cost can make it unrealistic, according to a 2013 study eomaine commissioned to determine whether it could offer an organics diversion program to the communities it serves in southern Maine. Ultimately, eomaine decided it was not feasible.

The study estimated that of the 132,558 tons of residential and commercial waste hauled to eomaine’s waste-to-energy plant in 2012, 3,100-21,000 tons of organics would be diverted depending on the participation rate.

In 2013, eomaine’s tip fee for organic material was \$30-\$40 per ton, compared with \$70.50 for solid waste sent to its waste-to-energy plant. While processing costs tend to be lower, hauling makes up a higher portion of the total costs of diverting organics, according to the eomaine study.

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GEORGE DANBY | BDN

A real enough ID

Maine and the feds headed for a faceoff over your state-issued driver’s license

BY CHRISTOPHER BURNS
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Maine legislators could be headed for a showdown with the federal government over the state’s refusal to comply with the mandates of a 10-year-old law regulating state-issued IDs.

Homeland Security Secretary Jeh Johnson announced Friday that beginning Jan. 22, 2018, travelers who want to board domestic flights will need to show either a state-issued ID that’s compliant with the 2005 Real ID Act or an accepted alternative, such as a passport.

That could become a headache for travelers from Maine and the 26 others states that have flouted the mandates of the Real ID Act, which set new, uniform security standards for how states issue ID cards. Those requirements include denying licenses to undocumented immigrants, using facial recognition technology and limiting licenses’ validity to eight years.

But not long after Real ID passed, a number of state legislatures fought back against what they saw as an invasion of privacy and the creation of what amounted to an “internal passport.”

In 2007, Maine became the first state to reject it, passing legislation prohibiting compliance with the law’s mandates. Another 26 states followed suit, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures. And Maine has held firm to its objections.

That means unless legislators take steps to get into compliance or Homeland Security finds a compromise with Maine and other noncompliant states, travelers with Maine driver’s licenses may need a passport to clear airport security for domestic flights in two years.

Heading to a showdown

While Maine has a law on the books prohibiting compliance with Real ID, the state has already met most of the federal law’s requirements. It has tightened security where driver’s licenses are made and prevented people from getting multiple state-issued ID cards. Undocumented immigrants can no longer get Maine licenses.

Maine hasn’t yet complied with some of the act’s more controversial requirements, such as using facial recognition software at Bureau of Motor Vehicles offices and fingerprinting BMV employees. In addition, the state hasn’t started to use Real ID-approved security markings on ID cards.

Homeland Security can’t force Maine to enact the remaining mandates, but Maine Secretary of State Matthew Dunlap said it can effectively force states to adopt Real ID by not accepting ID cards from noncompliant states for federal purposes. On Oct. 10, 2015, Homeland Security began doing just that by requiring visitors to show compliant ID cards to enter military bases, nuclear power plants and other secure federal facilities, such as the Department of Homeland Security headquarters in Washington, D.C.

Any move to comply with the law will require legislative approval.

In addition to Maine’s law prohibiting general compliance with Real ID, state law includes a number of other individual provisions that go against Real ID requirements, said state Rep. Andrew McLean, D-Gorham, House chair of the Legislature’s Transportation Committee, which oversees the Bureau of Motor Vehicles. In 2011, See *License*, Page D3

Finding a better way to give a hand up

No work is insignificant. All labor that uplifts humanity has dignity and importance and should be undertaken with painstaking excellence.”

A quote from Martin Luther King. You’d be hard-pressed to find someone in politics who disagrees with it, mostly because it reflects a commonly held truth. That is why the GOP often points out with concern the marked drop in the percentage of Americans in the labor force; honest work provides individuals with dignity. And this past weekend, Speaker Paul Ryan echoed

King in his weekly radio address, speaking about giving people a hand up, not a hand out. That includes getting people back into the workforce, rather than sitting idly by in economic malaise.



MICHAEL CIANCHETTE

President Obama must have heard Republican calls, as he used his radio address to pitch an idea tweaking the unemployment system. The goal would be to incentivize people into taking jobs paying less than their prior ones.

That may be a worthwhile objective. After all, everyone claims they do not want government programs to disincentivize working. But the White House’s proposal does not go far enough. Our unemployment system, like Social Security, the tax code and numerous other programs, is built for an early 20th century industrial society. That is not the economy we live in today; it is time to do things better.

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We are in the midst of an entrepreneurship infatuation boom. From “Shark Tank” to Greenlight Maine, capital competitions are popular entertainment. We celebrate local success stories, like WEX, IDEXX and others. But smaller businesses are hot and growing as well. Yet, especially in the so-called “creative” industries, many of the people working in those businesses are not employees, but contractors. They don’t get coverage from unemployment. Neither are they subject to the new minimum wage in Portland nor are they receiving employer-provided health insurance under the Affordable Care Act.

Meanwhile, we are seeing a concurrent rise in the “gig” economy. Take Uber. Drivers choose when to work and provide their own vehicles; the app connects them to their customers for a fee. In many ways, they mirror Maine lobstermen, who own their vessels and have dealers who bring their product to market. We could consider their sternmen, who are not employees under federal law but rather classified as self-employed. Or others, such as farmers and loggers, who work the land as a profession and live off whatever earnings they make.

Very few of these contractors, self-employed business owners and entrepreneurs would be helped by the tweaks the president proposes, nor are they helped by the unemployment system as presently constituted. It creates disincentives, where those out of work avoid participating in the new economy — gig work — to protect a government benefit. And that is to say nothing of those unethical people who work for cash and underreport their income to skate on taxes or collect welfare benefits.

In many ways, the existing system provides the worst of both worlds. Employees are pushed toward traditional employment relationships because government programs have artificially changed the risk calculus — the “unemployment” safety net gets See *Better*, Page D3