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Ohio University
News & Information

Tuesday, April 22, 2008

Composting system to be online this fall

One in a series of stories for Earth Week, April 12-22, 2008

Apr 16, 2008

By Alison Wayner

Ohio University is well on its way to establishing the first full-scale composting project at an Ohio college or university and believed to be the largest in-vessel system at any college in the nation.

Less than one year after receiving two substantial grants for the project from the Ohio Department of Natural Resources, the university has purchased the composting system and a solar array that will generate 35 percent of the electricity needed to run the site.

The system, from Wright Environmental Management Inc., has the capacity to handle up to two tons of compostable materials per day, including food waste, biodegradable packaging materials, grounds/landscaping waste and other organic materials. Scheduled for delivery this summer, the system will be located at The Ridges, just off Dairy Lane.

"The site will be developed over the summer, and we'll be running tests and getting up to speed in anticipation of students returning in September," Sustainability Coordinator Sonia Marcus said.

With the help of a large machine that speeds up the composting process, an in-vessel system allows for the processing of biodegradable waste to nutrient-rich soil in just 14 days. In-vessel composting systems process biodegradable waste in enclosed reactors where air temperature and moisture conditions can be controlled. Because the system is insulated, it can capture heat and therefore speed up the composting process. Keeping the compost enclosed means there is little risk of contamination to the surrounding area. A built-in biofilter filters the gases coming off of the material, significantly reducing odors.

Recycling and Refuse Manager Ed Newman said the soil will be put to use in campus landscaping projects. Campus Recycling will operate the system and transport compostable waste from campus locations to The Ridges site.

The composting operation will be a money saver in the long run, Newman said.

"From my perspective, it will enable us to turn what currently is a

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Earth Week tip from the Office of Sustainability

Throughout Earth Week, the Office of Sustainability will provide daily suggestions for incorporating hassle-free, environment-friendly actions into your regular routine. Today's tip:

Make the switch to CFLs

Compact fluorescent lightbulbs use just a quarter of the energy needed by an incandescent light bulb to produce the same amount of light. Less energy means less coal mining, less coal burning and less coal waste in the Appalachian region. In honor of Earth Week, the Office of Sustainability is offering one free CFL to any staff or faculty who has an incandescent bulb to replace in their office. Just e-mail Sarah Dewitt at dewitt@ohio.edu and a bulb will be delivered to your office to exchange.

Plan now for Earth Day, April 22, when Ohio University employees and students are being asked to walk, bike or carpool to work.

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liability, such as sending trash to the landfill, into an asset," he said. "We'll be able to reduce costs on things such as fertilizer because we'll be able to use the compost soil."

Marcus quickly ticks off additional benefits -- for the university and the planet.

"Diverting Ohio University's biodegradable and compostable waste from the Athens-Hocking landfill will allow us to shrink our ecological footprint, reduce our waste management and landscaping costs, decrease pre- and post-consumer food waste, produce a valuable soil amendment and create new learning and research opportunities for faculty and students," she said.

In addition, the 6.15-kilowatt solar photovoltaic power source for the system will offset 9,000 pounds of carbon emissions each year, resulting in roughly 270,000 pounds of carbon averted over an operational period of 30 years.

Newman would like to see the composting system eventually turn into a source of revenue for the university. "Maybe somewhere on down the line we could partner with local farmers who could use our soil or with area businesses that could use it for landscaping," he said. "I see a lot of potential for this project."

He added that as a leader in sustainability, Ohio University could set the tone for how other institutions approach the "greening" of their campuses.

"My hope is that we'll be a model for other colleges and universities looking for ways to reduce their waste."

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