

Dutchess County Compost Plans Meet Climate Solutions

Jessie Haas

Sometimes it just does not compute. Food waste is bad, we know, but we tend to think that is because it represents food not going to hungry people who need it. But our food—or rather, our habits of cleaning up after ourselves—has an enormous impact on climate change.

All agricultural impacts aside, food waste—from plate scrapings to banana peels, to the zucchini that grew mold in the refrigerator, to stale bread—can be used for good or ill. If thrown into the landfill, it generates methane, a potent greenhouse gas. For context, waste management accounts for 12% of New York State’s greenhouse gas emissions, with a quarter of that toll coming from food waste.

Properly done, composting does not produce methane. Instead, discarded food, lawn clippings, autumn leaves, and other organic waste are turned into a soil amendment that can grow more food, and in many cases, increase the ability of the soil to sequester carbon.

In New York, counties and municipalities are responsible for their own waste disposal. Dutchess County, which contains the cities of Poughkeepsie and Wappingers Falls, is now in the process of updating its ten-year plan, which is making composting a priority.



Recycling is part of the solution to achieve the goal of zero waste to landfills. (Nick Fewings/Unsplash)

Officials acknowledge that public composting infrastructure is inadequate. There is only one facility that takes residential waste, though several accept organic waste from businesses.

“Composting is a priority, and we believe residential composting and local composting programs are the most logical options,” told Kerri Russell, deputy commissioner of the county’s Division of Solid Waste Management, to the *Albany Times Union*. Pilot programs were conducted in three Dutchess County municipalities in 2022: the town of Red Hook, the village of Rhinebeck, and the city of Beacon, and all were deemed successful. The county’s draft plan proposes a feasibility study to see if another compost-

ing facility is needed in the western part of the county.

Composting is ranked at number 60 in *Project Drawdown’s* list of climate solutions. If widely adopted, it could reduce landfill methane emissions by an equivalent of 2.28 gigatons of CO2 by 2050, at a net savings of \$60.8 billion.

The Dutchess County plan stands firmly against landfills. There are no operational landfills in Dutchess County, which relies heavily on the waste-to-energy incinerator run by Wheelabrator Technologies. It can burn up to 164,000 tons of trash a year, generating energy

enough to power 10,000 homes, which it sells to Central Hudson. The waste facility was built decades ago to avoid the negative effects of landfills.

Waste-to-energy is not without controversy. Incinerators can emit mercury, lead, particulate matter, sulfur dioxide, nitrous oxide, and CO2. The Tishman Environment and Design Center at the New School reported in 2019 that the Dutchess County facility was among the most polluting in the U.S. However, Russell notes that emissions consistently fall within or below state and federal mandates.

Waste-to-Energy ranks #68 in *Drawdown’s* list of climate solution. While noting the environmental risks, *Drawdown* notes that a ton of waste can

generate as much electricity as one-third of a ton of coal. It estimates that 1.1 gigatons of greenhouse gas emissions can be avoided by 2050 through the use of incinerators. “Considering the disadvantages, this is a “bridge” solution—one that will decline as preferable waste-management solutions, including zero waste, composting, and recycling become more widely adopted globally.” *Drawdown* also notes, “Waste-to-energy can impede emergence of something better: zero-waste practices that eliminate the need for landfills and incinerators altogether. If this sounds starry-eyed or impractical, know that ten large corporations (as of 2017) have committed to zero waste to landfill, including Interface, Subaru, Toyota, and Google.”

Dutchess County has a high recycling rate, bans polystyrene food containers and plastic film bags, and has mandated placement of public recycling containers. Much of the county’s construction and demolition waste is already diverted from the incinerator, and the plan is to increase that number.

The incinerator will likely run past the 2027 date specified in its financing bond, but it is not a long-term solution, so now is the time to be planning for those.

Jessie Haas lives in an off-grid solar cabin in southern Vermont with husband Michael J. Daley. She is the author of 41 books for children and adults, including Spooky Season. ♻️

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