

Stevens County Organics Compost Collection Program

Greater MN Recycling and Composting Grant Progress and Interim Report

Brief Project Description:

The Stevens County Organic Compost Collection Program was established in 2021 after Stevens County Environmental Services applied for a grant through the MPCA Environmental Assistance Grant program. The program aims to increase opportunities, access, and education surrounding implementation of Organics Recycling throughout Stevens County, MN. With partners, Engebretson Disposal and Pope/Douglas Solid Waste Management, Stevens County organics will be hauled to the Glacial Ridge Compost Facility outside of Hoffman, MN. Starting with large waste producers/institutions and following with smaller waste producers/households, the program hopes to eventually provide organics recycling across all of Stevens County.

Starting in August 2021, Syd Bauer was hired as the project intern. Since that time Stevens County employees and partners have been working throughout the Stevens County community to enact the tasks of the grant. Highlights include 65-gallon carts provided through Engebretson Disposal, initiation of organics recycling at multiple businesses, restaurants, and schools, and an array of community education and events.

Looking forward Stevens County Organics partners are working to establish community dropsite locations, implement organics recycling available at the Stevens County Fair, and continue reaching out to households and businesses with education surrounding organics.

Those interested in learning more about the program and seeing the information shared with the public should visit www.co.stevens.mn.us/organics

Project Evaluation

Task 1: Develop School Organics Program

Starting in September, Syd met with multiple cafeteria school staff across Stevens County (Chokio/Alberta Public School (C/A), Hancock Public Schools (Hancock), Morris Area Elementary/High School (MAES/MAHS)). MAES cafeteria has participated in organics sorting in the past through the University of Minnesota Morris (UMN-Morris) compost project. After initial meetings it was decided that C/A was not interested in starting up organics at this time, that Hancock showed interest, and that MAES/MAHS would be able to start with some assistance. Engebretson Disposal started running organics pickup routes in December of 2021, on Mondays and Thursdays. Public Schools who did end up starting the sorting and pickup process began in January/February of 2022. Initiating organics sorting in the schools has been one of the more challenging tasks of the grant. This section highlights the storyline of implementing organics recycling at the schools.

Hancock:

Hancock Public School is a K-12 school in Hancock, MN, serving both the city residents of Hancock and the rural surrounding areas.

Organics Intern, Syd Bauer met multiple times with the cafeteria and kitchen staff members at Hancock Public Schools. They showed great excitement and hopefulness about starting up the program, some staff also showed some hesitancy and resistance. The staff assisting students during lunch shared that they had some concerns about spacing of indoor bins and how likely the students were to follow the new system of sorting. The kitchen staff had very few concerns

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about “back of house” sorting and started organics recycling right away. Other concerns highlighted were the amount of outdoor 65-gallon organics carts the school would need to store up to four days of organics Monday-Thursday.

Before the cafeteria sorting process began, Syd met with Hancock cafeteria staff to decide what kind of signage and tabling would be useful. They decided on a separate sign stand and table with three holes so that the table and stand could be more easily adjusted for spacing as construction was to happen in the cafeteria in the coming year. Signage was designed and printed through Palmer Creations in Glenwood, MN. They are the same company to design and print the signage in Pope/Douglas counties which has created a cohesive regional system of visual education. Tables and sign stands were constructed through Daniel’s Food Equipment in Parkers Prairie, MN.



Image A - Hancock Public School sign stand (not pictured, separate organics sorting table)

After multiple weeks of brainstorming ideas, Hancock decided to first start with rerouting how the students approached the garbage line in the cafeteria. This was decided so the students would have a more practical way to dump their waste and put the silverware and trays in places convenient for the kitchen staff. Students utilized the new line system for a while and then sorting was instituted. The cafeteria staff did not use compostable bags at first, to ensure that if students sorted wrong, it would not impact the actual compost product. After a few days of sorting with regular trash bags and students catching on, cafeteria staff started using compostable bags. Cafeteria staff found that elementary aged students picked up on sorting quickly and the only concerns were that it did take them a little bit longer to get through the line. High School aged students were found to not sort as well, and not care as much about the system.

After a week of successful, yet still in the initial stages of starting up the program, administrators at Hancock Public Schools decided to shut down the organics program. They cited the reasons being the cafeteria could not accommodate the space needed for bins and sorting. This shut down falls heavily on Sydney, as since the cafeteria staff were so excited at the initial meetings, Sydney was not careful and attentive to include administrators thoroughly during the planning process. Hancock Public Schools did not organics recycle for the rest of the school year. Tables, carts, and signage was picked up from the school and put into storage. There are plans to use the supplies at another school this fall.

Morris Area Elementary School:

The Morris Area Elementary School is the largest Elementary School in Stevens County. The building although attached physically to the Morris Area High School is its own separate entity serving Pre-K to 6th grade.



Image B - MAES cafeteria sorting station

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MAES has participated in a successful organics recycling program in past years due to partnership with UMN-Morris. Starting in 2017 elementary students at MAES would sort their lunch waste into 3 bins: recycling, trash, and organics. Each day staff from UMN-Morris Facilities Management would come to MAES and pick up the organics bin to drop at the UMN-Morris compost pile. These bins did not use bags, as Facilities Management staff was cleaning the bins each day as they were emptied. Students during this time also poured their leftover milk into a separate bucket to get dumped down the drain in the MAES dish room. This ensured that multiple gallons of milk would not be heavy water weight in the compost bins for transport and allowed UMN-Morris Facilities Management to have better control over their compost pile wetness. The UMN-Morris & MAES compost program ended at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, as students were eating in their classrooms instead of together in the cafeteria.



Image C - MAES 5th graders at lunchtime

The initial challenges of re-starting organics recycling at MAES were: (1) teaching the hundreds of students where things from various lunch lines are sorted each day, and (2) how carts and bins would be set up and taken down each day. It was decided that utilizing the cafeteria budget, MAES would hire someone working as a para in the school to stand near the bins at lunch each day and help guide the students to sort correctly. This person was responsible for setting up the signage, bins, and bags each day, helping the students sort, and then bringing the carts with organics to the loading dock in the high school for pick-up.

MAES decided to only get a sign stand through Daniel's Food Equipment, as many of the students at the school would not be tall enough to use a sorting table with the three holes.

This process started in February 2022 and successfully ran until the end of the 2021-2022 school year. Staff found that the younger students, although taking more time to sort than the older students, adapted to the process successfully. Older students were more often found to rush the sorting process and mistakenly put something in the wrong bin, but never to a point of deep concern for the program.

This program was also successful in teaching the many adults working in the building how organics recycling works.

Morris Area High School:

Working with the MAES kitchen staff, MAHS decided on getting a cafeteria sorting table with three holes and the sign stand attached. From the beginning, sorting at the high school was trickier for many reasons: (1) most students did not show interest in the process, (2) there was less support from administrators and kitchen staff to ensure that students were sorting correctly, and (3) Stevens County Organics staff did not have the staffing capacity to set up, supervise, and take down lunch waste materials each day.

Although the signage and materials stayed at the MAHS for most of the spring semester, the school did not utilize green organics bags for most of that time due to the amount of contamination. The program was successful in showing



Image D - MAHS sorting table and attached sign stand

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students that this type of sorting system exists. And although they were not all participating correctly, many high school students have been sorting correctly and were more aware of the program through their jobs in town that are participating in the program.

There are plans to work more with the cafeteria staff and students as the school year begins to hopefully get students and staff off to a smoother start for organics recycling in the 2022-2023 school year.

Future plans for establishing organics in schools involve meeting with MAES/MAHS cafeteria staff over the summer to prepare a “Welcome Back” presentation about organics for students and staff, working with the small private St. Mary’s School to initiate organics recycling in Fall of 2023, and presenting to more students and classrooms about waste systems in Stevens County.

Task 2: Develop Business, Restaurant, and Healthcare Facilities Organics Recycling

Reaching out to businesses and restaurants was one of the first tasks in the grant enacted by the Stevens County Organics partners. The partners decided to reach out to a handful of impactful and interested facilities in the community first, including Willie’s SuperValu, Stones Throw Café, Don’s Café, The University of Minnesota Morris, and Old No. 1 Bar and Grill, to name a few. These establishments are known to have more food waste than others, are leaders in our community, and have shown interest in organics recycling in the past.

At the first meeting with each of these establishments Syd presented information on the waste process and history in Stevens County, why Stevens County was choosing to participate and pilot this program, and how it will impact the community in the future. Included in the first meeting was also information on how organics recycling will work in the local establishments, information on compostable takeout products and bags, and a quick guide to what is and is not organics recyclable. All documents in the Organics Welcome Packet shared with establishments are included with this report.

Each business reacted slightly differently to the proposal of engaging with the program. There were some general themes of concern about cost for the program, concern about extra work for the staff, interest in participating, and also a strong willingness to try it out.

The process of getting businesses set up for organics recycling included purchasing materials for use, educating managers on organics recycling practices, and researching already owned materials to see if they were organics recyclable by the ASTM 6400 standards.

Signage was designed and purchased through Palmer Creations of Glenwood, MN. This was the same company that designed the PDSWM signage materials, creating a cohesive set of visual education materials across multiple counties in West-Central MN. Stickers were designed by Palmer Creations and purchased through Graphic Xperts of Minneapolis.



Image E - Three SlimJim containers on wheels with stickers and bags

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Bins were purchased through Dalco, the same company used by PDSWM. Most establishments decided to use SlimJim 23-gal containers or Brute 32-gal containers. Both have the option of wheel attachments and come in multiple colors. Bins purchased were grey, blue, or green to correspond with the trash, recycling, and organics signage. Organics compostable bags were purchased through Hillyard. Stevens County Courthouse and multiple other institutions in Stevens County are already customers of Hillyard so getting bags into our community was made a bit smoother. The EcoSafe compostable bags through Hillyard are available in an array of sizes from 13-gal to 64-gal to accommodate whichever bins establishments decided to use. Many establishments decided to not purchase new bins, and simply use ones already in house.

After a couple initial hiccups to be expected and a small learning curve, most local businesses participating had gotten the hang of the process fairly quickly. Syd continued to supply them bags as needed and is starting the process of making sure everyone can purchase bags through their own suppliers.

Currently there are approximately 15 establishments on the bi-weekly pickup schedule. For the summer, pickups will be going down to once a week as the University and Schools are not in session and therefore producing much less waste.

Future plans for organics recycling at businesses and restaurants includes continuing reaching out to more establishments with organics waste to encourage their participation in the program, reach out to facilities with Spanish speaking employees once translation is completed on all signage and educational materials, and continue the process of celebrating and encouraging current program participants.



Image F - Organics bin at Willie's SuperValu Bakery

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Task 3: Education and promotion to implement organics program

Starting in October of 2021, Stevens County Organics staff wanted to share the word that organics recycling would be soon coming to our community. They hosted an event in partnership with the West Central MN Climate Network to bring folks together and share about the PDSWM history and how the program would work in Stevens County. This event allowed the organics team to collect contact information for those interested in the program and got the word out about the upcoming program.

In November of 2021 Syd was asked to present to Ms. House's MAHS 8th grade Earth Science classes. She used this time to share with the students where garbage goes in our community, how organics recycling would work at the Morris Area High School, and get feedback from students on what items to be aware of in the MAHS cafeteria. This was a fun and receptive day with 4 different class periods of students.

Syd has given multiple presentations to local groups about the Stevens County Organics program and the potential for said groups to partner with the County to host a Stevens County Dropsite. At each of these presentations Syd has highlighted where Stevens County garbage goes, why we want to participate in organics recycling, and how the organics recycling program is working. Community members are very excited and receptive, they want to learn more about this process.

Organics Recycling has also been offered at many one-time events in Stevens County. Notably the St. Mary's School Fish Fry and the Assumption Church Knights of Columbus Hog Roast. At both events Stevens County provided signage, bags, and education and the event organizers worked to sort waste. Both events also came to Stevens County Organics to ask about doing organics recycling instead of Syd reaching out to them.

Syd has also reached out to many local businesses to encourage them to stock household sized organics recycling bags. Businesses that currently stock these bags include Willie's SuperValu, ACE Hardware, and Town & Country. These businesses are promoted in Stevens County Household Guides as places to purchase compostable bags for household containers.

Important to note is that all Stevens County Organics signage has been designed and purchased through Palmer Creations of Glenwood, except for the "We Organics Recycle" sign and window clings. These signs directly replicate the ones in neighboring Pope/Douglas counties, as they used the same company. This is creating a regional educational system surrounding waste signage.

Future plans for education and promotion of the organics program include a vendor booth & educational engagement at the Stevens County Fair, a "Drop Site Kickoff" event to show community members the drop sites and give away Organics starter kits, and continual engagement with any community organizations/events that have an interest in Organics recycling.



Image G - Community conversation at the Organics Kickoff



Image H - Syd and St. Mary's Student (Aubryn) educating Fish Fry customers and sorting waste

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Task 4: Enter into an agreement for collection and transportation with Engebretson Disposal

Stevens County entered into an Organics Collection and Hauling Agreement with Engebretson Sanitary Service, Inc. on October 5, 2021. The Agreement lays out responsibilities of both the County and Engebretson. Some highlights of the Agreement include: 1) Engebretson will deliver 65-gallon organics cart(s) to the participating high generation customers; 2) collection will occur weekly on Thursdays. However, high generating customers can be serviced twice weekly on Monday and Thursdays; 3) collected organics will be delivered to Glacial Ridge Composting Facility near Hoffman, MN; 4) the County will pay Engebretson on a monthly basis at a fee of \$135 per hour; 5) the term of the Agreement is for two years, starting October 5, 2021, and will continue until June 30, 2023. After the expiration of the initial term, the Agreement can automatically renew each year for an additional one-year term.

Engebretson's have been great to work with in start-up and continuation of the organics pilot program. They have worked well with the County Organics Intern, Solid Waste Administrator, and participating businesses. This contract agreement is included as an attachment to this report.

Task 5: Enter into an agreement for disposal of organics with Pope/Douglas Solid Waste

Stevens County entered into an Organics Processing Agreement with the Pope/Douglas Solid Waste Board on November 2, 2021. The Agreement lays out the responsibilities of both parties. Some highlights of the Agreement include: 1) County organics must be weighed at a certified truck scale to serve as proof of weight just prior to organics being tipped at the Glacial Ridge Compost Facility; 2) only approved organics will be accepted during normal operating hours; 3) any organics material that contains more than 5% by volume contamination or a significant quantity of glass can be rejected; 4) the County is to pay a tipping fee of \$50 per ton; 5) any transfer of organics will be charged to the County for the actual tipping fee at that facility plus the weight averaged percentage of the transport fee; 6) the length of the Agreement commenced on November 2, 2021 and continues through June 30, 2023. After the initial term, the Agreement may be extended for one-year terms by mutual agreement of the parties.

To date, Stevens County organics is transported to the Glacial Ridge Compost Facility. Since the Facility is not yet operational, the organics are then transported to Tri County Organics in St. Cloud. Pope/Douglas charges the County the tip fee of that facility (\$60/ton) along with a \$48.69/ton transport fee. This contract agreement is included as an attachment to this report.

Task 6: Construct Community Organic Recycling Drop Sites

From the beginning the Organics Grant partners were interested in many locations for the first organics dropsites. The three locations suggested in the initial grant were the Morris City Shop, the UMN Morris campus, and the Stevens County Highway garage. After discussion and brainstorming, it was determined that the Morris City Shop is the best location for the first dropsite. This location is well known by in and out of town folks as it currently houses a recycling drop off, the annual Christmas tree drop off, and the local grass & brush pile drop off. After discussion with the City Council and City Manager this location was approved for drop site construction.



Image 1 - An example of a Douglas County dropsite that will be replicated in Stevens County

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After spending some time during the winter and spring months searching for contractors, Syd was in contact with a few. The May 12th storm in West Central MN that shut down power for multiple days and caused lots of physical damage required local contractors to put off projects and do some immediate damage control. Because of this Syd ended up reaching out to the fencing company utilized by Pope/Douglas Solid Waste Management for their dropsites instead. This company will be able to come late summer to install the first dropsite, and if a location is chosen, install the second one at that same time.



Image J - An example of drop site signage in Osakis, MN. Stevens County will replicate signs like this in English and Spanish

The signage used at the dropsites will be similar if not identical to the signage used in Pope/Douglas counties. The main additions or changes will be Stevens County has hired an interpreter to do translations on signage and flyers. The Stevens County Organics Dropsites will be in Spanish and English to ensure better access to the new recycling program.

Future plans for organic recycling drop sites include constructing the third and potentially fourth drop site in Stevens County and hosting drop site kickoff and Q&A meetings to share information about Stevens County Organics.

Task 7: Purchase Residential Organic Recycling Supplies

Backpacking off PDSWM, the Stevens County Organics program purchased 75 three-gallon household collection containers from Orbis corporations. These 75 containers will be packed with the Stevens County Household Organics Recycling Guide, the Stevens County Waste Systems guide, a trio of trash, recycling, and organics stickers, and a box of compostable bags from one of the local businesses selling them. This kit will be given out to interested parties who show up to the dropsite kickoffs in late summer. Some of the kits will be fully in English, and some will be fully in Spanish (guides, stickers, and box of bags) to ensure that community members can get the full information.

Future plans for residential organics recycling supplies are to ask for photo submissions from the public once kits go out to showcase how different households are incorporating organics recycling into their homes.

Task 8: Reporting

Organics Intern, Sydney, has been keeping documentation of work done in multiple ways. Some methods include: this interim report, the drafted Stevens County Organics Project Report document (which will provide a summary of the project for those hoping to learn from the Stevens County Organics process), and on the Stevens County website. The website is constantly updated with new materials, information, and photos about the program.

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Supporting Documents & Attachments:

Most of these documents can be found on the Stevens County Organics Webpage.

To request a specific document, email Syd at sydneybauer@co.stevens.mn.us

Stevens County Organics Program Google Photos Folder: <https://photos.app.goo.gl/YmGqdMV8QFnA18Up7>

Stevens County Household Organics Recycling Guide (PDF)

Guía para Reciclaje de Desechos Biodegradables del Hogar (PDF)

Stevens County Waste Systems Booklet (PDF)

Stevens County Organics Homemakers Presentation – 3.10.2022 (PDF)

Organics Drop Sites – Morris City Council-01.11.2022 (PDF)

April/May 2022 Organics Newsletter (PDF)

March 2022 Organics Newsletter (PDF)

Stevens County Organics - Organics Sign (PDF)

Stevens County Organics - Recycling Sign (PDF)

Stevens County Organics - Trash Sign (PDF)

Organics Welcome Packet – About Stevens County Organics Recycling (PDF)

Organics Welcome Packet – About Stevens County Waste Systems (PDF)

Organics Welcome Packet – Commercial Customers Compostable Bags and Vendors (PDF)

Organics Welcome Packet – Compostable Dinnerware and Vendors (PDF)

Organics Welcome Packet – How to Organics Recycle for Businesses (PDF)

Engbretson's Organics Collection Hauling Agreement (PDF)

PopeDouglas Solid Waste Management Organics Processing Agreement (PDF)