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Publix wastes not, recycles old food

By ELAINE WALKER

When Publix needs to dispose of unedible fruits, vegetables and meat, the grocery chain normally dumps them in a landfill.

That's about to change with a recycling partnership with Organic Recovery. The new Pompano Beach company unveiled a facility Thursday that will convert the food waste from Publix stores into an organic plant food or soil supplement.

Starting this week, food waste from the meat, deli, produce and bakery departments of 56 Publix stores in Broward County will be delivered to the Pompano Beach plant for recycling. By the end of the summer, the facility is expected to service all 84 Publix stores in Broward. By mid-2009, all 237 Publix stores in the tri-county area are scheduled to be recycling food waste with Organic Recovery.

"Publix believes that our continued success depends on sustaining the environment," said Dave Duncan, vice president of facility services for the Lakeland-based Publix Super Markets.

Organic Recovery's recycling process takes less than three hours to turn a head of lettuce and a slab of beef into a liquid plant food or harvest-to-harvest, which could be used by anyone. The food is ground up and then put through an enzymatic digestion process that turns the waste into a liquid that still retains much of the food's nutrients. The Pompano Beach plant can produce 7,500 gallons a day.

The idea is that Organic Recovery offers a more environmentally friendly alternative as compared to composting. For every ton of food waste that ends up in the landfill, an equivalent of four tons of carbon enters the atmosphere. At the same time, Organic Recovery's liquid fertilizer eliminates the need for petroleum-based chemical fertilizer, which is the number three contributor to global warming.

"Food waste has no business going into a landfill, making CO2 and contributing to global warming," said Jeff Young, chief executive and one of four founders of Organic Recovery, which employs 26 people at the 37,700-square-foot plant. "It should be collected fresh, turned into plant food and put back where it belongs: in the soil, doing what it does best -- growing more food."

Thursday's grand opening of Organic Recovery even attracted Florida Gov. Charlie Crist, who hailed the concept as a "groundbreaking" event that is "important to all of Florida."

"Recycling is so important to do because it makes Florida cleaner and makes us a better state," Crist said. "There is gold in green. These companies are going to do well as a result of their leadership."

'EXCITED'

Publix started recycling in 1974, when one of Duncan's duties as a stock boy was to pile up cardboard boxes. In 2007, Publix recycled 217,000 tons of cardboard and 7,000 tons of plastic. Those efforts saved 3.7 million trees, 1.5 billion gallons of water, 2.5 million barrels of oil and 650,000 cubic yards

of landfill space.

But despite all those efforts, only 42 percent of the supermarket chain's waste stream is being recycled. A big missing piece of the remaining 58 percent was the wasted food.

"We were recycling everything there was a market for," Duncan said. "We've had recycling goals that we haven't been able to meet. That's why we were so excited when we saw this opportunity."

While Publix is not a partner in Organic Recovery's business, Duncan would not discuss the financial terms of the deal and whether the supermarket chain stands to profit from the fertilizer sales. If the program is successful in South Florida, Organic Recovery will build facilities in Lakeland and Atlanta to service other Publix stores.

HOW FIRM STARTED

Organic Recovery was started in 2006 by private investors who raised \$4.4 million in private placements to build the Pompano Beach plant. But the company is a spin-off from AMT Bio-products of New Bedford, Mass, which has been using a similar process for 15 years to convert seafood waste into Organic Gem fertilizer. AMT sells just under \$2 million a year in Organic Gem.

"The demand for the product was much larger than we were able to produce," Young said. "We wanted to grow the company so we had to get a raw material that was much more available."

By next summer, Young predicts the Pompano Beach company will be doing \$10 million in sales.