Transcript

Virgil

How does composting work at the NIH?

Surakshya

We currently have a pre-consumer food scrap composting program at NIH. It happens at the Building 10 Cafeteria and in the Building 50 coffee shop.

Lucy

The Solid Waste Team found an opportunity to divert our pre-consumer composting waste from food services.

Surakshya

[Which is] basically, kitchen waste made up of uncontaminated food scraps generated from spoiled inventory and routine food preparation.

Lucy

There's much less risk posed that way. Also, it’s easier to control that particular waste stream. Instead of wildly varying substances, it could be simply produce, or dairy, or some other grouping.

Surakshya

The “user interface” of the program mainly rests under authority of the kitchen staff.

Lucy

It’s nothing super complex or scary. Due to the use of the anaerobic digester, we’ve been able to explore new opportunities to expand our waste diversion efforts with our particular vendor.

Virgil

Part of that first question: when compost is collected, do they round up all of the food waste and send it to a facility to be processed through this “anaerobic digestion”?

Lucy

The compost is collected during the food prep process in its own receptacle, separate from general waste or recycling. These food scraps are then immediately disposed of in

an airtight, sealed container with a locking lid. We ensure that disposal is quick so that we avoid pests, odors, or any other nuisance to the staff.

Surakshya

These containers are taken to Building 25 and stored in a cold room as further protection against pests and to control temperature. We wouldn't want to leave the bins outside for too long, especially in the summertime. So, the bins are kept in the cold room until the day of the pickup by the vendor.

Lucy

We take extra precaution due to the unique environment that is the NIH Bethesda campus. Since we have a Clinical Center, we need to be very cognizant and aware of immunosuppressed or additionally at-risk visitors. None of our processes should add any potential harm or risk within our shared spaces.

Virgil

Makes sense.

Surakshya

If you want something short and sweet:

Compost is collected from the kitchen and brought into Building 25, where it gets stored in the cold room. Then, it gets picked up by the vendor and they process it through anerobic digestion.

Virgil

You've definitely assured me of the benefits of composting on the NIH campus; how it's clean, how it's very regimented. I can see how it can help with meeting some of those requirements that you were talking about earlier. What do you think are some of the benefits of composting specifically on the environment?

Surakshya

Well, the first one is limiting the landfill. Disposing of compostables in landfills prevents the intended aerobic decomposition and leads to anaerobic decomposition, which releases potent greenhouse gases, such as methane. So while composting isn't necessarily cheap upfront, it represents avoiding the societal cost that traditional landfill waste has.

Lucy

By saving space in landfills, there is also increased prevention of breaches and contamination of the environment from overfilling. If a landfill sight breaches, the cleanup costs can be astronomical. It's hard to put a price on how helpful prevention can be.

Virgil

With food waste being 1/3 of the total food supply in the US, I guess composting can really add up in saving landfill space.

Lucy

Also, composting provides nutrient rich soil amendments. It's like recycling but in the food system.

Virgil

You have very well-illustrated how something that may seem straightforward like compost actually has a lot more forethought that goes into it. With these considerations in mind, what do you think about the future of compost at NIH?

Lucy

I look forward to exploring additional opportunities where possible. I think as the industry expands and technology changes, it will be interesting to see how rapidly [composting] can grow. We've seen a lot of expansion within other green sectors and alternatives in how we manage our resources. I'm excited to watch the field grow.

Surakshya

There are so many areas for growth both inside and outside of the food sector. People usually think of post-consumer options, which could be an interesting option given food waste. But I think even areas like paper towels from bathrooms could be explored in the context of composting. Of course, just because something is "biodegradable" doesn't mean it is compostable. But, like Lucy said, the future holds many promising opportunities.

Virgil

Very interesting! Thanks so much for your time.