

**New York State
Environmental Investment Program
Research Project Summary
Cayuga Nature Center, Inc.**

Project Background

Cayuga Nature Center sits on 135 acres of nature preserve in Ithaca, New York. The Center’s mission is to educate school and community groups and the general public about the environment and the outdoors.

Project Description

The project was undertaken to explore the potential to establish a small-scale (< 1,000 ton/day) commercially generated food scrap composting facility. The project team was to assess whether demonstrations, workshops and technical training combined with a working facility could be used to increase food scrap composting and the number of composting sites in the region.

Project Results

At the start of the project, the facility was composting four tons per week of food scraps delivered by a local Wegman’s supermarket and was seeking to expand operations at the facility to the maximum permitted level (14 tons per week). Although businesses and institutions educated through the project were interested in composting, by the end of the project economic and regulatory barriers to doing so existed. During the course of the project, landfill tip fees in the area dropped from about \$60 to \$45/ton. And, although Cayuga Nature Center was issued a variance to NYS DEC Part 360 regulations governing composting (i.e., they were not required to obtain a permit), the DEC stopped issuing such variances for small operators shortly after the project began. This meant that none of the Center’s clients could obtain a variance but, if they

wanted to start similar small scale operations, would need to apply for a full Part 360 permit, a very costly endeavor. Another hindrance to expanded composting capacity in the area was that the billing structure for restaurant waste disposal was based on volume, rather than weight. Organics are heavy and dense and therefore inexpensive to dispose of if charges are by volume. Finally, municipal charges for use of public water treatment facilities do not always reflect the true cost of usage for large quantity food waste generators (using garbage disposals) and therefore provide no incentive to divert organics to composting. For example, when large quantity generators strain POTW systems that are already at capacity, their charges do not increase. The project determined that small scale start up composting ventures seeking to take a “low technology” approach need to find low cost approaches to operating such as access to existing sites and equipment at little or no cost, inexpensive source materials, proximity to urban areas and access to end product markets. Unless the cost for these items is low, such composting facilities (of 5 tons/week) are not likely to be self-supporting.

While demonstration, education and technical training are useful tools in encouraging the adoption of new practices such as food scrap composting, the economics of a small scale composting operation are marginal unless waste disposal fees increase.

Contractor:	Cayuga Nature Center	NYS EIP Investment:	\$88,142
County:	Tompkins	Contractor Match:	\$41,872
ESD Region:	Southern Tier	Total:	\$130,014
ESD Contact:	518/292-5340	Completion Date:	January, 2000