

Waste not, want not

Emily Bobrow

Massachusetts is leading the way in recycling organic waste

Those last dregs of uneaten chowder may look like rubbish, but in Massachusetts such waste is increasingly seen as an opportunity. From July 2014 all companies and institutions in the state that produce more than 1 tonne a week of organic waste—including food, plants and manure—will be banned from sending the stuff to landfills. Instead, the state's biggest wasters (ie, big restaurants, universities and manufacturers rather than households) will need to get creative, donating edible food to charities and using the rest as compost or fodder for anaerobic-digestion facilities, which turn organic waste into energy. Massachusetts creates nearly 1.4m tonnes of organic waste each year. This plan aims to divert at least a third of it away from landfills by the end of the decade.

The Massachusetts ban is the most ambitious example of a new trend. Connecticut and Vermont will also enact laws to divert food waste from landfills in 2014. The rationale is plain: in small and densely populated states, landfill capacity is limited and

disposal costs are high: \$60-90 a tonne in Massachusetts, compared with a national average of about \$45. Decomposing food waste also generates methane, a greenhouse gas. But this biogas can be captured and turned into energy through the process of anaerobic digestion, and then be sold into the electricity grid.



Stopping the rot

The technology of anaerobic digestion has been around for a while. Although the industry has been taking off in Europe—especially in Germany and Sweden—it has been slow to grow in America, where vast stretches of cheap land have long meant that there is plenty of landfill capacity and little incentive to build costly waste-recycling plants. But rising electricity prices, dwindling landfill space and some voluntary recycling goals are encouraging states to embrace the potential of biogas.

To help the industry along, Massachusetts has made millions of dollars in low-interest loans and grants available to build new

America wastes around 35m tonnes of food a year

anaerobic digesters. “We believe this will end up saving money,” says Ken Kimmell, the commissioner of the state’s department of environmental protection.

States are sensibly beginning to see rubbish as a resource, not merely a burden. Yet America creates 35m tonnes of food waste a year. It is good to divert this rubbish from landfills, but it would be better still to stop creating so much of the stuff in the first place. ■

Emily Bobrow: online United States editor, *The Economist*