

OU's Composting Project continues to develop

Tara Pettit

Since its opening in January of 2007, the Baker Center has become the host of a new plan to promote and progress an ecologically friendly campus with the Composting Project, an initiative started by the Office of Sustainability. The Composting Project is a way to get the consumers of West 82 and The Front Room to make conscious disposal decisions by separating their garbage between the trash bin and the compost (all food waste and biodegradable cups, utensils, plates and napkins)

bin. Although the current composting system may not appear to be going anywhere right now, the idea is to allow students the opportunity to familiarize themselves with routinely organizing their waste products in preparation for the

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final touch to Ohio University's Composting Project: the actual composting unit. Ultimately, it's the university's future plan to purchase and install a solar-powered composting unit, with the ability to compact two to three tons of organic waste, that will officially get the ball rolling on the entire project. Once the composting unit is installed, it will be the largest in-vessel composting initiative at any university in the nation.

Currently, OU does not have an established system for separating the dining halls' organic waste. The dining halls alone produce about 10 tons of landfill waste a day, where all food and trash then ends up in the landfill or sewage systems. Landfill disposal costs around \$25,000 a month, and since the opening of the Baker Center, the campus' solid waste production has increased by an average of 2,500 meals a day, making landfill usage costs increase.

The composting unit will ultimately help in the proper management of OU's biodegradable waste in Baker's dining locations, as well as resident dining halls. With it, approximately 50 percent of all the dining locations' biodegradable waste flow can be separated from the primary trash flow and be composted. Most of the dining services' disposed recycled materials can be transformed into a rich soil that will then be utilized for campus landscaping and local agricultural purposes. The unit will be able to process around 2.5 tons of waste on a

daily basis, and convert waste into soil within 15 days. This is an odor-free process that will require no additional pathogen control or staff involvement in manning the machine.

Because the unit is solar-powered, it will provide an energy and cost efficient method to the use of electric power. OU's Office of Sustainability estimates that the composting unit will require approximately 1,750 kilowatt-hour of electric power per month, but the solar PV array has been designed to give off an average of 600 kWh per month, which sends any excess energy produced when the machine is not being operated back to the its utility grid. This operation is not only much more cost and energy efficient, but it's a maintenance free system that composes anything from food waste and biodegradable silverware, to ground waste and animal bedding from the campus research labs.

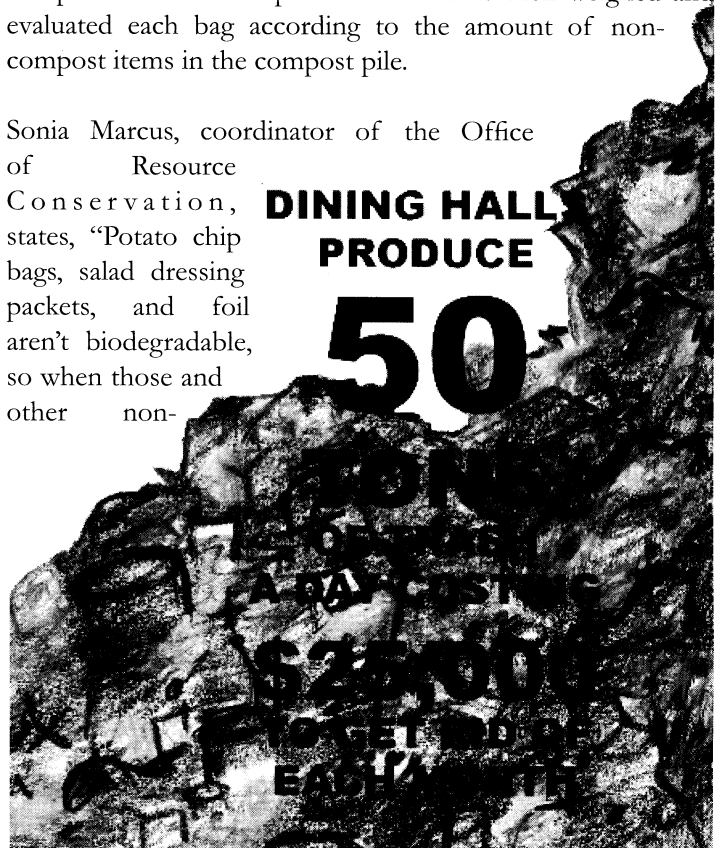
Last spring, a sustainable agriculture class conducted a waste audit in West 82 under the supervision of the university's Office of Resource Conservation. The waste audit was supported by the Ohio Department of National Resources' \$250,000 grant, which was the initial first step in the long-term plan to begin the composting project. The audit began with the custodians collecting waste from the separated bins and labeling them compost and non-compost. The students then weighed and evaluated each bag according to the amount of non-compost items in the compost pile.

Sonia Marcus, coordinator of the Office of Resource Conservation, states, "Potato chip bags, salad dressing packets, and foil aren't biodegradable, so when those and other non-

**DINING HALL
PRODUCE**

50

**\$25,000
EACH MONTH**



biodegradable materials go in the compost bin, they're considered contaminants."

From the audit, it was discovered 44 percent of waste was deposited in the trash bin, six percent in the bottle bin, and 50 percent into the compost bin. Roughly 73 percent of the compost bin had little to no contamination.

Marcus was happy to see the current success with waste separation in terms of low contamination rates and claims, "This is why we're starting this early. Now we have the space and time to try things out and to get people better at sorting before contamination can affect the functioning of the actual compost unit."

The waste audit was an opportunity for students to get involved in the Composting Project, and to experience the manual act of compost sorting.

"It was a good example for OU students to see the problems going on in the environment and that the university is doing something about it," senior Zodiac Maslin states.

Ohio University's Composting Project has received widespread approval from both the campus and community, with particular interest from university faculty in making the project apart

of academic curriculum for many classes within the science department.

The Office of Sustainability claims that the project "fits squarely within overall academic priorities by providing opportunities for learning and research on solid waste management, environmental engineering, sustainable agriculture and landscaping, and the need for alternative and renewable energy sources."

The Composting Project was one of six awardees within the state to receive \$300,000 through the Ohio Department of Natural Resources. The money is being set aside to purchase the composting unit in the spring of 2008, along with all other grants being awarded to the initiative. With the installment of the unit, OU will be recognized within the state as one of the only schools to use a large in-vessel composting system. The entire compost initiative allows the university to reinforce its reputation within the state as a progressively sustainable campus, while shrinking its ecological footprint on Athens County through the reduction of landfill usage. •

Tara Pettit is a sophomore news-ed journalism major; a vegetarian, actor, avid reader, and painter. Mostly, she tries to live a green-friendly lifestyle, in hopes of making a small difference.

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NEW COMPOST SYSTEM

