

Turning food scraps into compost rather than methane

By Doug Holmes

Kitchen scraps make up about one-third of all residential waste collected each week from curbside garbage bins. When this organic waste is buried at the landfill, it produces methane – a poisonous greenhouse gas more potent than carbon dioxide.

In recent years, the provincial government has been tightening environmental regulations for landfills and in response some larger landfills are capturing methane to convert into renewable natural gas or electricity. However, methane capture technology is expensive and instead most local governments are dealing with methane emissions by diverting organic waste from their landfill and composting it.

Currently, about 80% of all British Columbians have their food scraps collected separately from their garbage for the purpose of organic composting. The only part of the province where it's not common is the Okanagan – until now.

Starting in April, Summerland residents will be required to put their food scraps in with their yard waste in their green carts, which will be collected every week year-round. The grey garbage and blue recycling carts will be collected on alternating weeks.

This is the approach that works best for dual-compartment garbage trucks, and it's how it's done in other parts of the province.

Any type of food – fruit, vegetables, meat, bones, fish, bread – will be able to go in the green cart, along with food-stained paper like napkins, paper plates, and newspaper used as a bin liner.

Backyard composters can still be used but people are asked to put scraps that can't be composted at home, such as meat and bread, into the green bin. The new composting facility at the Summerland landfill is designed to control odour and reach temperatures to kill pathogens found in meat and rotten food.

In March, the District will provide each household with a "kitchen catcher" that can be used for food scraps inside the home along with an information package to explain the schedule change and what can and cannot go into the green cart. There will also be open houses, newsletter articles, podcast, general advertising, and school presentations.

While garbage will be collected every other week rather than weekly, experience from other communities suggests that most homeowners will not require a larger grey cart. However, if necessary, residents can request a larger grey cart for an additional fee or purchase tag-a-bag stickers.

Dealing with garbage is expensive, and residents who recycle and minimize waste shouldn't have to subsidize neighbours who produce a lot of it.

By reducing the amount of garbage going into the landfill, we help to control landfill operating costs and extend the life of the landfill. Having to close a landfill and open a new one is an onerous and costly process that we want to put off for as long as possible.

Another benefit of collecting mixed kitchen and yard waste is that we can produce high quality compost full of nutrients and microbes for the benefit of local vegetable gardens and farmers' fields. We are an agricultural region and a community full of passionate gardeners; a made-in-Summerland soil amender is in high demand.

Doug Holmes is mayor of Summerland.