

Food waste can be recycled to help feed the planet

DANIELLE NIERENBERG AND ISAAC HOPKINS |

Posted: Monday, November 14, 2011

How many of our mothers reminded us of the hungry kids in Africa when we left the table with food on our plates? While a half-eaten sandwich here or a forgotten apple there may not seem like much, lots of them add up. The United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization estimates that wealthy countries waste 222 million tons of food annually. In the U.S. alone, we waste enough food in one day to fill The University of New Mexico's football stadium to overflowing, twice!

According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, foodstuffs are the largest ingredient of solid waste that ends up in city dumps. When food rots away in landfills, it turns into methane, a greenhouse gas that is 20 times more potent than carbon dioxide. But effective initiatives to reduce the amount of waste ending up in New Mexico's landfills do exist. From composting food waste into fertilizer to delivering surplus to the needy, these initiatives are making a difference.

Soilutions Organics Recycling Facility in Albuquerque is one of the leading recyclers of organic waste in the state. It recycles food waste and turns it into compost, which can then be used as fertilizer in gardens and farms instead of rotting in trash dumps. It has partnered with Downtown Growers Market and Thunderbird Café in Albuquerque, as well as many Whole Foods stores and others, to help them keep food waste out of landfills. The compost that Soilutions produces is sold to farmers and gardeners, and is approved for organic growing.

Another way to cut back on food waste is to donate excess to a food pantry. This food can in turn be used to feed the hungry in the state. In 2007, the New Mexico Collaboration to End Hunger was formed in response to a U.S. Department of Agriculture report that placed New Mexico as the most food-insecure state in the union. As of 2010, New Mexico had improved substantially, but more than 15 percent of New Mexico residents were still considered food-insecure, and about 5.6 percent of residents were "very low food insecure."

Food banks have played a critical role in New Mexico's improvement. In 2000, five regional food banks in New Mexico formed the New Mexico Association of Food Banks, which serves the entire state through more than 600 agencies. It provides emergency food aid, while ensuring that it includes sufficient fresh produce. The largest regional food bank is the Roadrunner Food Bank of New Mexico, which distributes 22 million pounds of food each year. It is making numerous efforts to minimize its ecological footprint as well, and has partnered with Albuquerque Bernalillo County Water Utility Authority, which composts its spoiled produce.

The Roadrunner Food Bank benefits from gardeners who are increasingly donating their excess produce, which would otherwise rot in their yards or refrigerators. In 2011, a growing number of gardeners have been pushing for more gleaning programs, in which volunteers harvest and donate

produce that is missed by automatic reapers. Gleaning programs rescue food from rotting in the field and also provide a source of produce for food pantries, but such initiatives are few and far between in New Mexico.

Making use of what we already produce is important if we are to adequately feed a population that has reached 7 billion. According to Tristram Stuart, food-waste expert and a contributing author to Worldwatch Institute's "State of the World 2011: Innovations that Nourish the Planet" report, the nearly 40 million tons of food wasted by U.S. households, retailers and food services each year is enough to satisfy the hunger of the approximately 1 billion malnourished people in the world. State of the World 2011 highlights agricultural innovations, including reductions in post-harvest losses in sub-Saharan Africa that are helping alleviate hunger and poverty.

Food is a precious commodity, but it is not always treated that way in the U.S. Simple lifestyle changes, like keeping track of leftovers, recycling wastes as compost, and donating surplus to food-recovery programs in the state can have profound effects. New Mexico has already made progress in reducing its food waste and bringing people out of food insecurity, but we need more of these types of initiatives if we are to significantly decrease the millions of tons of food that are thrown away each year.

Danielle Nierenberg is project director of the Worldwatch Institute's Nourishing the Planet project (www.NourishingthePlanet.org). Isaac Hopkins is a research intern with Nourishing the Planet.