Do We Need Standards?

Nick McAllister argues that now, more than ever, community composters need to grasp the nettle of developing a standards scheme and code of practice for the sector.

The Scottish Environmental Protection Agency (SEPA) have recently made one of the most significant announcements for the composting industry since Margaret Beckett made her announcement of a temporary ban on the composting of animal by-products several years ago. While this announcement only affects composters in Scotland, it is highly likely the first step to that announcement being taken up across the UK.

The announcement, made in a statement by SEPA issued in September of last year, said "SEPA's current position is that compost which is produced for a market, is able to meet the quality standards before any blending of the compost with other wastes, materials, composts, products or additives (where the standards are designed to ensure that the compost can be used with no adverse impact on the environment or human health), which has certainty of market and can be put to use without further recovery is likely to be taken to be fully recovered."

This means that SEPA are the first people in the UK to define when compost is no longer a waste product and is in fact a fully recovered product. What's more this is based on that product having been produced in accordance with a standards scheme.

At the same time The Composting Association are developing an industry code of practice for the composting industry. This will have implications at both the national and individual composting facility levels. The Composting Association will have a much stronger negotiating position with policy makers if the industry is working to a code of practice.

The individual composting facility will have a much easier time obtaining the necessary permits to set up and run their facility if they can show they are going to operate in accordance with the code of practice. If they then produce compost in accordance with a standards scheme they will be massively increasing the marketability of that compost.

Composters will also find themselves more attractive to local authorities. Since the development of the British Standards Institute Publicly Available Specification (PAS)100 standards scheme for compost products, the majority of local authority tenders and contracts that have been issued have required the composter to be working in accordance with PAS 100 standards.

So where does this leave community composters? Well it depends on the size of the composting group. The larger social enterprises amongst us are big and beautiful enough to be able to cope with the costs associated with becoming compliant with the PAS 100 scheme, and would most probably benefit from becoming compliant. Groups at this level need fully developed marketing strategies for their products and will also need to be able to work within the local authority contract framework in order to guarantee their long-term survival. Being able to say they are PAS 100 compliant will help both these things.

Our small to medium groups, in other words the majority of community composters, will however find it very hard to meet the costs of regular scientific analysis of finished compost that are required by the scheme. The full suite of tests on the finished composts related to PAS 100 costs for example £400 from one of the main laboratories. This would be another significant burden on top of the proposed fees for the waste management licensing exemptions. The new exemption might say it is possible to sell compost under an exemption but if it is already hard to meet the registration fee for the exemption, the PAS 100 costs could well outweigh any gains in income.

This does not mean that smaller groups could not meet the processing requirements of PAS 100. They start with specifying the treatment of source separated biodegradable wastes, and then simply specify the recording of batches, turning regimes and the length of maturation periods. The situation will hopefully be similar for the code of practice.

It would therefore be possible to develop a community sector code of practice and standards scheme, based around these operational practices. The need for laboratory scientific testing could either be kept to a minimum or possibly in many cases replaced with a greater reliance on the utilisation of new relatively affordable self testing devices that are currently under development.

If it is possible for the sector to develop a standards scheme and code of practice would there be any real benefit? It would seem the real benefits might come in our perceived credibility. If the sector is seen to operating to a code of conduct and standards scheme, this can be used as a marketing tool for that sector. It can be used to promote the high quality of community groups and to give a wide range of parties an increased level of confidence in the sector.

How would negotiations with the Environment Agency and DEFRA on the new system of exemptions have gone, if these tools had been in place? It is easy to imagine that they might have gone a lot better if the sector was perceived to be operating with a high level of environmental standards enshrined in a code of conduct and standards scheme.

Similarly local authorities and their service providers might be a lot more interested in working with their local community sector within the realms of service delivery, hopefully leading to an improved level of financial security for the sector.

Of course developing these kinds of tools is not easy and opinions will be divided as to their merits. I personally believe it is integral to the long term future of the sector.