

Op-Ed

By Senator Pete Campos

Hey New Mexico, let's work together to turn our trash problems into regenerative solutions.

One trash problem is the pollution generated from how we dispose solid waste. Right now, as much as 25-50% of our solid waste stream is organic waste which includes food scraps and green waste (yard trimming, branches, leaves, etc.). When organic waste is thrown out with the rest of our trash it winds up at landfills. There it decomposes without oxygen and produces not only methane, a potent greenhouse gas, but also leachate, a toxic liquid that contaminates soil and groundwater; furthermore, when organic waste is treated as solid waste, it releases other gasses like hydrogen sulfide and carbon monoxide that harm air quality and public health.

Another related trash problem beside all of the pollution we are causing is the constrained capacity at solid waste facilities. We're running out of room and capability to cost effectively treat all our trash at the existing facilities. Pressure mounts to relocate and build new facilities. But these are increasingly hard to site. People don't want landfills in their back yard. So they wind up further away in poorer neighborhoods, which is a social injustice and an environmental injustice because of accelerated emissions from the additional hauling of trash to these remote locations. To top it off, there is the growing problem of cost of living concerns and inflation because in addition to having to pay for moving trash disposal sites further away, existing sites are atrophying with overflow, deferred maintenance and lack of modernization.

So much of this is unnecessary. Think of it. If 25-50% of our trash is organic waste contributing to so many of these trash problems, why don't we make a commitment and investment into diverting, separating out and preventing organic waste from being in the solid waste stream and then use the organic waste for a collective and more natural purpose: to make compost.

We have a huge opportunity to advance composting and thereby support working lands, farms, gardens and other soil vital places all throughout the Land of Enchantment. Producing and using much more compost would: 1) improve productivity and public health (because applying compost in conjunction with soil health principles grows food with much greater nutrient density without the need for toxic inputs); 2) secure precious water resources (land covered with compost infiltrates and holds water in the ground instead of flooding); and 3) help prevent wildfire and overall make us more resilient to climate change.

So here is what we can do right now in collaboration with our state and local communities to put New Mexico on a more successful and sustainable footing: we can work together to enact the Food Recovery and Composting Act. Like 34 other states including Texas, Oklahoma and Nebraska already do, we could respond to our trash problems by paying a nominal state surcharge on solid waste disposal which would only amount to 7 dollars a year for each adult resident (it could be merely 4 dollars per year if we reduce our waste accordingly). We could use the proceeds from this to set up a dedicated fund offering significant grants to counties, municipalities, solid waste authorities and other widespread entities for the purpose of diverting organic waste from the solid waste stream and advancing composting. And we could help prevent organic waste to begin with by supporting food recovery and food rescue which would help alleviate poverty and hunger.

We can all together do this now - at low cost and high impact - in a way that serves the common good. Or we can complain and put our heads in the sand like Oscar the Grouch. But truth be told, if we do nothing now but maintain the status quo, our trash problems will gather steam and soon become a train wreck, the clean up costs from which will be astronomical.