

By PERCY FOSTER, executive administrator of Cré – the Composting Association of Ireland

Though the Irish composting industry is young it has grown rapidly in only a few years. In 2006 there were 37 facilities in operation: 13 of them processed 71,000 tonnes of green waste; 15 were bio waste facilities and processed 52,000 tonnes; and five were sewage sludge processors, dealing with 33,000 tonnes.

Besides composting sites charging gate fees per tonne of biodegradable materials processed as a source of income, another lucrative source of income is the sale of compost products.

People often view composting as a waste management tool, but instead it should be viewed as a compost product manufacturing process. Many Irish composting sites are starting to realise the potential revenues from the sale of compost products from source-separated wastes. They have developed many niche compost products that they are able to demand high prices for, and many composting sites are being innovative in the products and blends they can produce. One composting site even produces specialist compost products for turf grass which is sold all over Europe.

The amounts of compost produced from facilities and the respective main end use in 2006 were: 34,000 tonnes of green waste-derived compost, the main use being peat dilution (63%); 25,000 tonnes of biowaste derived compost, the main use being agriculture (56%); and 17,000 tonnes of sewage sludge-derived compost, with the main use being agriculture (78%).

A major impediment of markets for compost is that there is no compost quality assurance scheme in Ireland. However, Cré is completing a research project to develop such a standard for source separated materials, with limits for heavy metals, impurities, pathogens and stability. This project is funded by the Environmental Protection Agency. Following this step, Cré will develop a quality assurance scheme (QAS) like the UK PAS 100 Scheme. A voluntary QAS will ensure that compost producers maintain good process management (eg temperature) and will give confidence to users (landscapers, farmers, etc) of the compost's high quality.

Other barriers to the development of markets for compost are:

- 3 It's a new product with a misunderstanding of what compost is.
- 3 The perception that compost is a waste-derived product.
- 3 Many do not know how to use compost and what its benefits are.

3 The competing products – such as peat, spent mushroom compost and animal manures – and the resistance of customers not wanting to change their current practices with existing products. 3 Non-appreciation of the stability of compost and its effect on plant growth. Creating markets for compost is an area in which Cré has been focusing its activities through providing information at conferences, training and conducting research. The latest initiative is a new publication, Practical Guide to Compost Marketing and Sales, and an associated training course.

The guide has been created to train staff on the basics of compost marketing and sales as well as to provide a step-by-step method of prospecting and managing sales leads.

With the new Green Party Minister for Environment, Heritage and Local Government, John Gormley, settling into his new job, it can be expected that in 2008 he will make vital changes to help the composting industry to divert biodegradable material from landfill, which will result in larger volumes of compost products being produced.

About Cré

Cré – the Composting Association of Ireland was established in 2001. Cré is the Irish word for 'earth'. Cré is a not-for-profit organisation that serves as a forum to promote composting and compost utilisation. The association has over 90 members from local authorities, private companies, compost producers, colleges, equipment suppliers and consultants.

Percy Foster can be contacted at Cré – the Composting Association of Ireland, Business Innovation Centre, Institute of Technology Campus, Ballinode, Sligo (tel 00353 (0)86- 8129260; fax 00353 (0)71-9144500; email percy@cre.ie). There is further information on the Cré website at www.cre.ie.