

Ag Plastics: Disposal Challenges Mount

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"Plastic does burn well," said Stoltzfus. The amount of energy created by the material "would be a desirable product" for community incinerators, "compared to some of the slop they usually get," he said.

Stoltzfus indicated there are preferential rates for disposable materials, including small wood chips and pallets and other items. "If we could bring a load of just plastic, we could perhaps get a reduction in the tipping fee," he said.

Stoltzfus is working closely with growers who sell their fruits and vegetables at the Leola Produce Auction to work on methods of pickup.

"The cost of disposal to the farmer is going to be the challenge," Stoltzfus said. "I'm not sure what the farmers are willing to pay. If it's \$50, it's probably not going to

be a big deal. If it's \$150, it might be."

Clark Stauffer, Ephrata-area vegetable producer, suggested that some person with a truck could set up contracts with farmers to get rid of the plastic.

So mass incineration of plastic at an appropriate facility could be a practical solution.

The Lancaster County Resource Recovery Facility is operated by the Lancaster County Solid Waste Management Authority south of Bainbridge. The facility, constructed in 1988 for \$105 million, processes up to 1,200 tons of refuse every day — including plastic.

Timothy J. Breneisen, recycling coordinator, said that farmers can bring in plastic for a fee of \$69 per ton. Mulch film must be tied in bundles with baler twine or wire and must not have any loose tape.

"Farmers who bundle up the plastic will make it easier and more

efficient for us to handle," said Breneisen.

The incinerator, owned by the Authority and operated by Ogden Martin Systems of Lancaster, Inc., accepts all types of plastic. The material is burned together with other refuse — including paper waste, wet garbage (including vegetable and fruit products), wood, and other materials.

The Authority operates on a \$47 million per year budget and sells power generated from steam turbines from garbage to Met Ed — about \$1 million worth of electricity each month.

The fee for disposal will affect farmers' options, according to Breneisen. "It all boils down to money, no doubt about it," he said.

At a rough estimate, Lancaster County farms produce about 5,000 tons of ag plastics a year. At a disposal rate of \$69 per ton, that adds up to about \$345,000 in garbage

receipts per year, or about \$150,000 worth of revenue for the Authority if all farmers would use this option.

Pennsylvania is not alone in disposal worries. According to James Garthe, Penn State ag engineer, "Florida has a major problem with ag plastics," he said. "They have about 15 million pounds of year of mulch film alone they have to deal with. And they're tearing their hair out just like we are."

"You'd think that they would have some major innovations, but they don't. They're looking at some mobile plastic cleaning equipment, but it's a \$200,000 machine."

If you simply let the plastic burn in a barrel or cage, the heat is not captured and energy is wasted.

"In this area, if farmers have to pay for disposal, they're going to be willing to pay," said Stauffer.

"We Americans are very wasteful," said Garthe. Unlike European industries, America doesn't have the "cradle-to-grave" mentality that makes use of recycled

materials.


Garthe said, "Cradle-to-grave is where the manufacturer of a product sells you a product to use for its useful life, then is responsible for accepting it back after you're through with it to recycle it into new products. Unfortunately in this country, after you buy it, you're responsible for disposing of it, and that disposal is often done wrecklessly."

Much like what PolyAmerica does, Garthe believes that the plastics industry has to bear some of the headaches and come up with some solutions for those who use ag plastics.

"Tell your supplier," Garthe said. "Tell him that you have a problem with ag plastics disposal."

Garthe suggested that farmers write a letter to the suppliers asking for help in coming up with viable, economic solutions.


Garthe said, "I know our society will come up with a solution to these environmental concerns, but it will have to be economically feasible. Everything boils down to economics."



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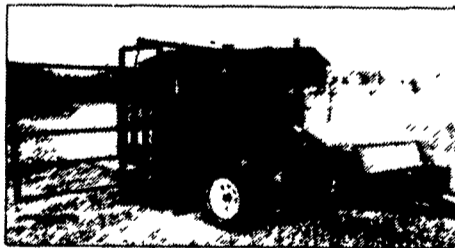
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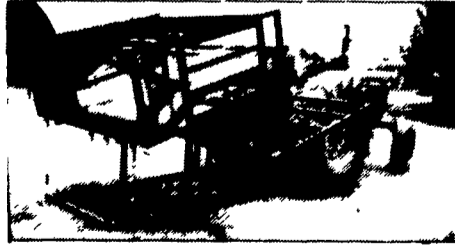
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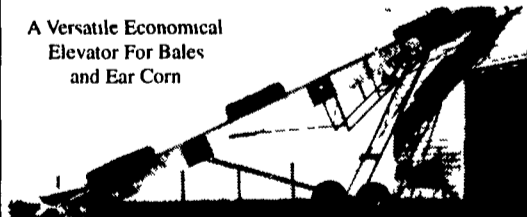
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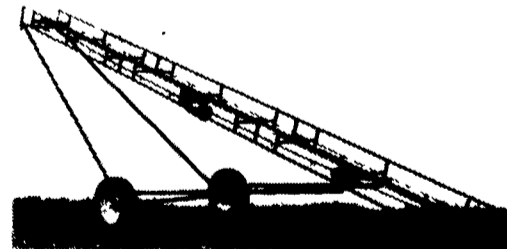
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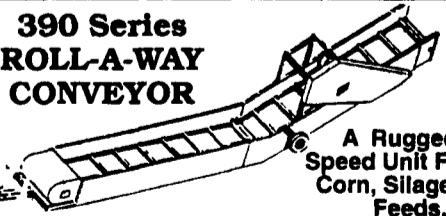


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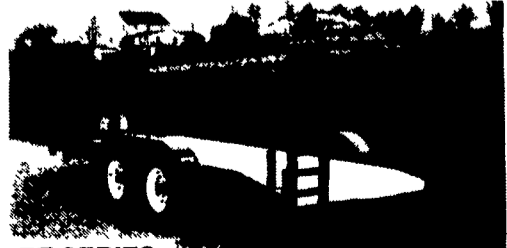


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