Recycling Agricultural Plastics Just Got Easier

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The Cornell University Waste Management Institute’s (CWMI) Recycling Agricultural Plastics Project (RAPP), in cooperation with Cornell Cooperative Extension of Franklin County (CCE), TAP industries; a materials recycling facility (MRF) serving the North Country, and the Franklin and Clinton County Soil and Water Conservation Districts (SWCDs), are about to make recycling your used agricultural plastics a whole lot easier.

Farmers who already have baled plastic on their farms, from previous collection efforts, are being asked to contact TAP Industries at their Malone recycling yard by calling 518-521-6657 or by emailing tapindustriessmalone@gmail.com (or you can contact CCE at 518-483-7403 or rlg24@cornell.edu) to make arrangements to have already baled plastic picked up at your farm, without cost. Funding for this effort is being provided by CWMI-RAPP.

In past years, a local agricultural plastic recycling coordinating team, consisting of employees from RAPP, Franklin and Clinton County SWCDs, and Clinton and Franklin County CCE, used specially-designed trailer-mounted trash compactors, or plastics ‘balers’, provided for the program by legislators, through funding to the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation, to ‘bale’ used agricultural plastic on-site at participating farms for shipping to MRFs in New York City and out-of-state. That strategy proved to be too expensive and, therefore, unsustainable. So, RAPP and CCE began exploring other options. By partnering with TAP Industries, a local MRF interested in promoting greater involvement in North Country recycling programs, agricultural plastics can be processed locally, instead of being trucked elsewhere, making the process much more cost-effective while minimizing handling and environmental impact.

‘Super-sacks’; large refuse bags similar to agricultural fertilizer bags, are available without cost to anyone who would like to participate. Agricultural and horticultural plastic can be stored in these sacks and conveniently dropped off at Tap Industries Malone facility, located on Railroad Street (enter from Brewster St.). Arrangements can be made for pick up, as well, for a fee.

Anyone interested in recycling their used agricultural plastics is encouraged to call CCE at 518-483-7403 or to contact me by email (rlg24@cornell.edu). Information on how to prepare agricultural and horticultural plastics, including used sap-collection tubing, for recycling is also available from CCE. Tap Industries will accept a wide range of other household and farming-related recyclables on-site as well, at no cost to the consumer. Visit http://tapindustriessmalone.com for more information. Although TAP Industries does not require that you make an appointment to drop off large quantities of agricultural plastic, making prior arrangements is greatly appreciated and may save you time. Deliveries are accepted year-round; Monday through Friday between 9:00 AM and 5:00 PM and on Saturdays from 9:00 AM through 2:00 PM.

Plastic Use in Agriculture

Traditionally, tower silos, made of steel or concrete, were used to store forages and grain. Today, plastic film is widely used to improve or replace these outmoded storage systems. And, because of the flexibility of the storage and marketing options associated with plastic films, their use continues to grow.

Farmers commonly store hay and high-energy corn silage in bunkers, with the excess stored in piles. Forage is immediately covered, usually with 6 mil plastic sealed tightly over the pile. Tires are then placed on the plastic to hold it securely in place and prevent spoilage from exposure to air. This method offers a comparatively inexpensive (short-term) forage-storing approach.

Storing and preserving silage in plastic bags; some as large as 300 feet or more in length and 8 to 12 feet in diameter, is becoming more widely used, as well. This relatively new method can be tailored for use with any size herd. And many farmers believe that utilizing plastic bags provides the safest, most affordable option, especially when compared to purchasing equipment outright.

Many farms have also moved from square hay bales to large round bales, which save time and labor. Round bales are not nearly as suited to barn storage as square bales, however, and are often stored outdoors, where exposure to weather and water penetration can greatly reduce feed value (palatability and digestibility). In fact, when stored on damp soil, deterioration at the bottom of the bales can be substantial. To reduce outside storage losses, round bales are covered with solid polyethylene sheeting or individually wrapped. Plastic covered post and beam or frame structures are sometimes constructed as temporary storage buildings, as well.
The use of plastics in horticulture has increased considerably in recent years, too. Plastic film is used in constructing greenhouses, high tunnels, low tunnels, and row covers, all of which are used to lengthen the growing season, minimize the effects of extreme weather events on crops, and improve productivity by optimizing plant growth and development in protected environments. Plastic film is also increasingly being used as a mulch, to increase the earliness, yield, and quality of crops like tomatoes, eggplant, and peppers. Drip irrigation tape is made of recyclable plastic too, as are pots, planters, cell packs, trays, and fertilizer and pesticide containers.

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