

Key Points to Remember when Composting Livestock

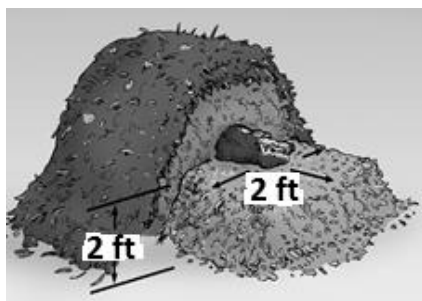
By Lindsay Ferlito

With rendering companies either not picking up or charging a high fee to do so, more farms have been considering on-farm composting to dispose of livestock carcasses. The benefit of composting, is that almost anybody can do it as long as you have the proper site, a tractor, organic material, and you follow some relatively straightforward steps. Although there is still a cost associated with on-farm composting (time/labor, tractor and fuel, and organic matter), it is still one of the cheapest options available to most farms.

In mid-October, Franklin County Soil and Water organized a training session run by Jean Bonhotal (Director of Cornell Waste Management Institute) at a local farm to demonstrate how to compost livestock. Jean covered the basics from site setup, which organic materials to use, and location on the farm, and then the farm showed their setup and a carcass was buried to be composted. This article will cover some of the guidelines found on the Cornell Waste Management Institute site and what Jean discussed during the program.

1. Select a site. Ideally the site is near the back of the farm, far from the roadside and the view of the public. The site should have good drainage and be at least 200 feet from wells and waterways. If composting is done properly, there should be no smell and no animals will be attracted. If it doesn't go quite to plan, and animals get into the carcass, you may have to move the location of the next site since some animals will learn that location is the source of food. By moving the location for a while, and ensuring composting is done properly, this will deter wildlife in the future.

2. Prepare a base. The carcass should be placed on a good base that is at least 24 inches high, and goes at least 24 inches out from the animal. The base should be made up of large (4-6 inches) organic material. Wood chips work the best. Check with your local town (especially after a big storm) and see if they have any chips they are looking to get rid of.

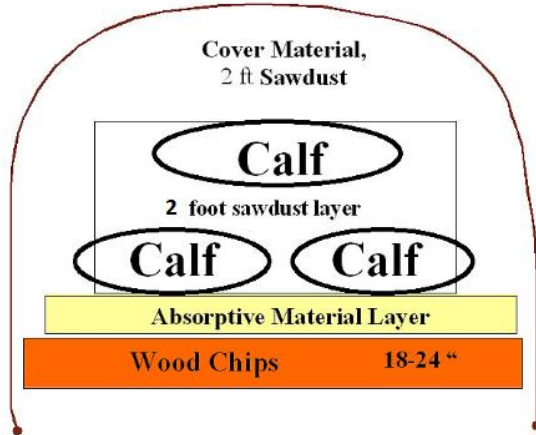


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3. Place animal and lance rumen. Once the base is ready, place the animal in the center of it (making sure there is still about 2 feet of base around the edges of the animal). Lance the rumen to prevent bloating and bursting (release of gases) after you've buried the animal.

4. Cover the animal. Only place 1 adult cow in each pile. If you have calves, you can layer them by placing the first calf down, and covering with about 2 feet of organic material, then adding the

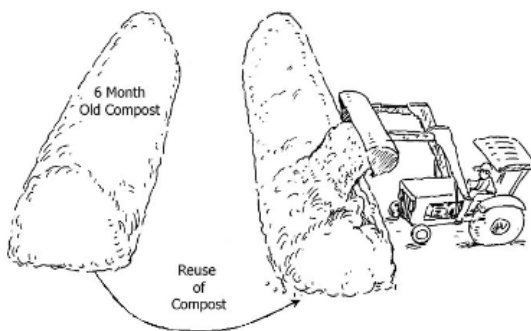
other calf and covering. The animals should be covered with 2 feet of organic material, and this can include feed refusals, old straw or sawdust bedding, or wood chips. Jean said try not to compost only 1 calf at a time since it won't generate as much heat and it's harder to compost. If you do only have 1 calf, add some manure around the calf to add organic matter to break down, which should help get it up to temperature and compost properly.



Adapted from J. Craig Williams, Penn State Cooperative Extension; and Lee Telega, Cornell University PRO-DAIRY.

5. Let it sit for 4-6 months. Once buried, leave the pile for at least 4-6 months before touching it, and then check to see if the carcass is fully composted. The pile does not need to be turned (flipped/rotated), but turning after 3 months will speed the composting process but odor does become an issue (so don't turn if you have neighbors nearby).

6. Reuse the material. After the carcass is degraded, you can reuse the organic material in your next compost pile, or remove the remaining bones and spread on the field.



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For more information, posters, and fact sheets on livestock composting, visit the Cornell Waste Management Institute website (<http://cwmi.css.cornell.edu/mortality.htm>)