

WHY HAZLEHEAD NEEDS COMPOSTING

BACKGROUND

I have been composting for 10 years. I started with Bill Butterworth who taught me about the N-Cycle and the rudiments of composting.

We have had no serious complaints in the last 10 years.

My permissions have been granted by the Environmental Agency and Barnsley Council. I have invested £170,000 in two Droppstadt Trommel Screens, £15000 improving the road access including a massive reinforcement over Sledbrook Stream to take lorries and road plannings to improve the roadway, £140,000 has been spent on new concrete, repairing old yards.

I have made these investments on the back of the permissions already received. Therefore no application for planning permission has been sought as the letter from BMBC categorically explains that is not required as 'development' would not be involved.

EMPLOYMENT

Farming on a marginal hill farms such as Hazlehead is limited to grass. Having no milking facilities production has been based on suckler cows producing beef and breeding ewes producing lamb.

With episodes of BSE and foot & mouth over the last 10 years, severely upsetting market prices, the business of composting with a steady income has been most welcome. In my 25 years of farming price increases have not kept with costs of production and when taking into account depreciation many years have incurred losses. Composting income has allowed me to retain four full time employees. *I could not do this with farming income alone.*

In 2002 I opened a farm shop, things were ok until 2008 with the credit crunch. Last year I had to make (along with natural wastage) eight people from the shop redundant. I now have four people working at the shop, the shop is struggling and the composting income has enabled me to subsidise the price of lamb & beef sold from the farm to the shop. Without this substitution I fear the shop will close together with four lost jobs.

My wife & I along with a part time book-keeper also work here, it could be argued that the composting is supporting the equivalent of 11 full time jobs.

NITRATE VULNERABLE ZONES

In the natural world, soil fertilizer is successfully sustained without human intervention. The soil continuously revives itself through a process of recycling. As things are, they fall to the ground, decay and are broken down naturally enriching the soil which in turn feeds the plants. Farmers take that process and streamline it by making compost which will keep their land vital and productive. This is a core organic practice nurturing & nourishing the soil to create conditions for healthy growing plants – plants that are stronger more disease resistant and contain more vitamins and minerals, than those grown in impoverished soils with artificial fertilizers and pesticides. Plants grown by non-organic methods may look and taste as good, but they will not contain the same levels of vitamins and trace elements as it's organic equivalent.

Humus or compost is the well decayed organic matter that gives the soil its structure and aids aeration and moisture retention. Soil structure is defined as the way the particles are held together. This relates to the humus content, electrical conductability and animal life in the soil. One acre of healthy land should contain over 1 ton of life in the form of worms and microbiological life. It is this life that feeds on and helps process decaying organic matter and are most prolific in soils rich in this substance.

Technically, humus is classified as a colloid which means it has the ability to hold onto nutrients through electrostatic charges. Humus colloids tend to have a negative charge and this enables them to attract the positively charged nutrients which will readily adhere to them.

This is the key point - organically farmed soils will hold onto their nitrogenous food sources without leaching. The relationship between humus and root hairs of the plant, means that the plant only takes in nitrogen when they require it as opposed to artificial fertiliser that releases regardless of the growing condition a certain amount of nitrogen every day. If that original nitrogen is not used up it ends up in watercourses and eventually rivers. This nitrogen is then taken in by aquatic plants, these grow and take up valuable oxygen out of the water and can lead to algae blooms creating oxygen defects and subsequent loss of life from animals requiring oxygen.

Humus doesn't leach and the use of it at Hazlehead is important as the river Don, a small but important trout stream flows through the middle of most of the farm.

WILDLIFE

Since the application of compost in 1999 I have seen several improvements in the wildlife of the farm. Hazlehead is on the moorland fringe and this is important for certain ground nesting birds – namely Curlews, Plovers, Snipe and Twites. The compost has increased the animal life of the soil and this in turn I believe has proved invaluable to long beaked birds. Owing to the high rainfall, the soft nature of our land coupled with the high animal life of the soil is the perfect combination for such birds – we even have two pairs of oyster catchers nesting every year for the last 5 years.

Compost has a PH of around 6.5 whereas artificial fertilizers tend to have an acidifying effect.

FUTURE

This year is the first year I am to farm without artificial fertilizers, relying 100% on compost. If this succeeds then the next move will be to go organic. This will give me the opportunity to turn the shop organic, which I beleive will give us that niche edge over other farm shops in the area.

Composting not only is creating a good deal of employment but it is also moulding the way I farm, which is good for production, good for wildlife, good for employment and good for the environment.