

THE COMPOSTING ENTREPRENEUR: A GUIDE TO BUILDING A SUSTAINABLE BUSINESS



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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<u>Biocycle.net</u> <u>Sustainable Solutions for a Greener Tomorrow</u> <u>Semanticscholar.org</u> <u>Compostconnect.org</u> <u>Matellio.com</u> <u>Grandviewresearch.com</u> Closed Loop Partners Report



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Introduction

The composting industry in the United States is expanding due to increasing public interest in composting, driven by growing awareness of its benefits, and new environmental and Municipal Solid Waste (MSW) mandates. Composting benefits the environment by decreasing landfill waste and enhancing soil structure and fertility, resulting in healthier plants, gardens and our planet.

This report seeks to provide high level insights and direction for entrepreneurs, stakeholders, decision-makers and environmental advocates aiming to provide tools to evaluate starting a composting recycling business in Florida. It's also recommended for those interested in starting a new business to have basic background of business management and accounting.

Understanding Demand and Supply

In the U.S., compost sales have traditionally focused on residential markets, but there is nowincreasing demand from commercial clients such as farmers, landscapers, and golf courses. Major events like the Fl Grand Prix and Bonnaroo, as well as other popular gatherings, who are large generators are also seeking composting solutions for their food waste. The rising interest in gardening, particularly among younger people, has boosted the need for organic compost. Additionally, the COVID-19 pandemic has further increased household compost demand nationwide.

According to Grandview Research, the U.S. residential organic compost market was valued at USD 363.2 million in 2021 and is projected to grow at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 8.6% from 2022 to 2030.

Large Generators are seeking food waste recycling like Institutional generators (Universities, Colleges, Schools and Prisons) and Commercial generators (Corporate campuses, stadiums, special events and restaurants) and small-medium generators (Residentials, small businesses)

Introduction (Cont.) Municipal solid waste (MSW) feedstock composition

MSW feed stocks refers to the materials collected from household and commercial waste that are used as a raw material in various processing or conversion processes. This can include organic waste, paper, plastics, glass, metals, and other materials typically found in municipal waste streams.

Methods and Processes of Food Waste Composting

What is Compost?

Composting is a controlled, aerobic (oxygen-required) processthat converts organic materials into a nutrient-rich, biologically-stable soil amendment or mulch through natural decomposition. The end product is compost. Microorganisms feed on the materials added to the compost pile during the composting process

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Details of Composting

Municipal solid waste (MSW) feedstock composition

Feed stocks includes sludges, manures, food scraps, vegetation waste, animal mortality and other organic waste.

Compost or topsoil and compost tea.

Gases/Odors, Leachate.

Composting is Aerobic

The process of conversion of inputs to outputs differs between composting and digestion primarily due to the presence, or absence, of oxygen. Composting is an aerobic process, so oxygen is essential for its success.

Digestion can be either aerobic or anaerobic, but is more often configured as an anaerobic process for the purpose of producing and capturing methane-rich biogas (aerobic digestion is used in some sewage sludge treatment schemes for stabilization and pasteurization, but is very energy-intensive)

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3 primary methods of commercial composting food

Turned windrow

Turned windrows are the most common method of composting but are not always advisable for food waste composting due to the potential for attracting vectors (i.e., flies, birds, small mammals) and for the need for continual housekeeping.

Housekeeping may require a continuous walk-through and audit of the pile to ensure that no feedstock (e.g., food waste) has fallen out of the pile. ASP (Aerated Static Pile)

Composters are focused first and foremost on product quality, but they are also driven to maximize throughput of material through their facility, which is one reason for the industry shift to more ASP systems, which have faster throughput times than traditional windrow facilities. In-vessel systems

In-vessel systems, being of fixed capacity, are often bettersuited for installations where the amount of food waste is known and not likely to increase much. There are several technology systems available globally

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Challenges and How to Deal with Them

The expansion of food waste composting has been slow, with the number of facilities processing food waste growing by just 8% from 2018 to 2023. Major obstacles to widespread adoption of organic recycling include contamination in source-separated organic materials, insufficient participation and incentives to generate costeffective processing volumes, and challenges related to economies of scale. To effectively tackle food waste on a large scale, the industry needs financial support and other assistance, including favorable public policies, to ensure composters are well-equipped to handle both food waste and food-contact compostable packaging.

In addition to this, lack of education on various aspects like knowledge of the valuable resource which is the feedstock which is a very valuable component in compost.

Some Major Challenges Addressed Here:

Limited land availability

Limited land for a composting business in cities requires creative solutions and efficient use of available space

Permits and approvals

Permits and approvals involves navigating complex and varied regulations, addressing environmental concerns, and managing timeconsuming and costly approval processes.

Contamination

Addressing contamination requires significant amounts of time and energy and is a major hindrance and financial burden to the composting process.

Limited Land Availability

High population density, high land costs and nuisance concerns are some of the factors contribute to the difficulties faced by food waste composting businesses in securing and utilizing land especially in South Florida where the demographics and geographic location makes land availability a biggerchallenge.

- Adapt Regulations and Policies: Advocate for local regulations and policies that support urban composting initiatives. Working with local authorities to streamline permitting processes or provide incentives for composting can facilitate the growth of composting businesses in cities.
- **Community Composting Programs:** Partner with local communities, schools, or businesses to establish community composting programs. Centralized composting facilities can efficiently manage organic waste from multiple sources, pooling resources and reducing individual space requirements.
- **Partner with Urban Farms or Gardens:** Collaborate with urban farms or community gardens to exchange composting services for access to their land. This mutually beneficial arrangement allows you to compost organic waste while providing valuable compost for agricultural use.
- Educate and Involve the Community: Educate the community about composting benefits and encourage residents to participate in home composting. By decentralizing composting efforts, you can alleviate pressure on centralized facilities and effectively manage organic waste at the source.
- **Compact Composting Systems:** Invest in compact composting systems designed for small spaces, such as compost tumblers or compact aerated compost bins. These systems control odor and manage composting efficiently within limited areas.
- Vertical Composting Systems: Implementing vertical composting systems such as composting towers or bins stacked vertically can maximize space utilization. These systems allow composting to occur upwards rather than spreading out horizontally.

Permits and Approvals

Florida typically requires several permits and approvals to ensure compliance with environmental regulations and local ordinances. Here are the key permits and approvals you may need. But regulations can vary depending on your location within Florida, so thorough research and compliance with all applicable laws are crucial. It's important to consult with local authorities and regulatory agencies early in the planning stages of your composting business to understand specific requirements and obtain the necessary permits and approvals. The exclusion of and recycling language as defined by Florida Statute 403.703 (36), F.S is a major problem.

- Environmental Permitting: Depending on the scale and nature of your composting operation, you may need an environmental permit from the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (DEP). This could include a Solid Waste Permit or other specific permits related to composting activities.
- Local Zoning Approval: Check with your local zoning department to ensure that your property or chosen location is zoned appropriately for composting activities. You may need to apply for a zoning variance or special permit if composting is not explicitly allowed in your current zoning designation.
- **Business License:** Obtain a business license from your local city or county government. This license allows you to legally operate your composting business within the jurisdiction.
- **Health Department Approval:** Depending on the type of composting (e.g., if it involves handling food waste), you may need approval from the local health department to ensure compliance with sanitation and health regulations.

Permits and Approvals (Cont.)

- **Stormwater Management:** Ensure compliance with stormwater management regulations to prevent runoff and contamination. This may involve obtaining permits or implementing best management practices (BMPs) to manage stormwater on-site.
- Waste Management Approval: If your composting business involves handling solid waste, including food waste, you may need approval from local waste management authorities or the DEP. This ensures proper handling, storage, and disposal of waste materials.
- Fire Department Approval: Composting operations may involve combustible materials, so approval from the local fire department may be necessary to ensure compliance with fire safety codes and regulations.
- **Department of Agriculture Approval:** If you plan to sell compost products commercially, you may need approval from the Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services (FDACS) for labeling, product quality, and compliance with agricultural regulations.

TYPES OF CONTAMINATION

- **Plastic and Synthetic Materials:** Items like plastic bags, wrappers, and synthetic fabrics can end up in compost, which can hinder the composting process and lead to microplastic contamination in the final product.
- **PFAS:** Per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances known as PFAS. They are widely used, long lasting chemicals, components of which break down very slowly over time. There are no known methods for removing PFAS chemicals from composts.
- **Chemical Contaminants:** Pesticides, herbicides, and other chemicals from food or yard waste can persist in compost, potentially affecting soil health and plant growth.
- **Diseases and Pathogens:** Contaminated food waste (like meat or dairy products) can introduce pathogens and diseases into compost, which can pose risks if not properly managed.
- **Heavy Metals:** Yard waste or food scraps that have come into contact with contaminated soil or have been treated with certain chemicals can introduce heavy metals into compost.
- Non-Organic Materials: Items like metal, glass, or other non-organic waste can be problematic, as they do not break down and can contaminate the compost.

Contamination

Properly managed compost provides valuable nutrients to soil and plants health, hence it is important to avoid contamination Dealing with contamination demands substantial time and effort, posing a major obstacle and financial strain on the composting process. These are some of the preventive measures

- Sorting and Screening: Implementing strict sorting procedures to remove non-compostable items before they enter the composting process helps reduce contamination.
- Education and Awareness: Educating clients and customers about what can and cannot be composted helps minimize the introduction of contaminants.
- **Proper Composting Techniques:** Using the right composting methods, like aerobic composting, can help manage and break down contaminants more effectively.
- **Regular Testing:** Testing compost for contaminants like pathogens, heavy metals, and other potential issues ensures the final product is safe and high-quality.
- Legislation and Guidelines: Following local regulations and guidelines for composting can help ensure that the process adheres to safety and quality standards.

Business Models

2 WAYS TO START

START YOUR OWN BUSINESS

GET INTO Public private partnership (PPP) - a great solution for all challengeS

Basic Business Knowledge For Entrepreneurs

To launch a composting business, it's advisable for entrepreneurs **without prior business experience** or education to enroll in a **Standard Business 101 online course** or a similar course offered by a local college. This will equip them with essential skills and knowledge on key aspects such as insurance, state and federal tax compliance, safety regulations, banking relationships, accounting and payroll, and safety requirements. Having a **solid business plan** in place is also crucial.

THREE business models of Commercial Composting Business which can be combined in different ways or can be done individually:

Exclusive MSW pick-up/drop off service

Expenses

- Labor Costs: Salaries and wages for drivers and support staff. Their benefits like workers compensation and other training costs.
- Equipment and Supplies: Containers, bins and liners for collecting food waste, safety equipment and uniforms.
- **Operational Costs:** Office rent and utilities, communication systems (phones, software) and administrative expenses (e.g., billing and customer service)
- Vehicle Costs: Purchase or lease of speciality trucks/vehicles, Insurance, fuel and maintenance
- Marketing and Sales: Advertising and promotional materials; Website development and maintenance
- Regulatory and Compliance Costs: Permits, licenses, Environmental compliance costs and liability insurance

Revenue Sources

- Service Fees based on subscription models: Monthly or pre-collection fees charged to customers (residential, commercial, or both)
- **Contracts and Agreements:** Long-term contracts with businesses, institutions, or municipalities.
- **Premium Services:** Extra charges for special pickups or expedited service
- **Partnerships:** Collaborations with local businesses, restaurants, or grocery stores for regular picksups.
- **Grants and Subsidies:** Government or environmental grants for sustainability effort.
- Value-Added Services: Selling compost or recycled products derived from the food waste to customers or businesses.

Exclusive Compost Manufacturing

Expenses

- **Raw Materials:** Organic waste or feedstock (e.g., yard waste, food scraps)
- **Processing Equipment, Maintenance and Repairs:** Composting machines (e.g., shredders, aerators, tumblers) Screening and curing equipment. Upkeep of equipment and machinery and Facility maintenance.
- **Operational Costs:** Rent or lease of production facility, utilities (water, electricity, heating). administrate costs like office supplies, equipment, accounting and bookkeeping
- Labor Costs: Wages for employees (e.g., production staff, quality control), Benefits and training
- **Packaging and Distribution:** Packaging materials (e.g. bags, bulk containers) and distribution logistics (e.g. transportation costs)
- **Regulatory, Compliance Costs and Insurance:** Permits and licenses, Environmental and health regulation compliance, Property and liability insurance and Workers' compensation insurance

Revenue Sources

- Sales of Composts: Bulk sales to commercial clients (e.g., nurseries, farms) and direct sales to consumers (e.g., gardeners, landscapers)
- **Retail Partnerships:** Distribution through garden centers or home improvement stores
- **Bulk Contracts:** Contracts with municipalities, landscaping companies, or agricultural businesses for large-scale compost needs
- **Subscription Services:** Regular delivery or subscription-based models for compost supply
- Value-Added Services: Sale of compost blends or specialty compost products.
- Educational Workshops and consulting Services: Hosting workshops or training sessions on composting techniques and benefits. Offering consulting services for composting operations or waste management solutions

Exclusive Compost marketing and selling

- Marketing, Advertising, Website and E-Commerce: Costs for digital marketing (e.g., social media ads, SEO). Branding and promotional materials (e.g., brochures, business cards). Development and maintenance of a website and online store. E-commerce platform fees and transaction costs.
- Sales and Distribution: Sales team salaries and commissions. distribution logistics (e.g., transportation, shipping costs)
- **Customer Service:** Support staff salaries and Customer service tools (e.g., CRM software)
- **Packaging:** Packaging materials for compost (e.g., bags, labels)
- Regulatory Compliance and insurance: Costs associated with labeling, safety, and environmental regulations. Liability insurance and Property insurance (if applicable)
- Market Research: Costs of researching market trends and customer preferences

Revenue Sources

- Sales of Compost: Online Sales, revenue from direct sales of compost products to consumers (e.g., gardeners, landscapers) and sales to businesses (e.g., nurseries, farms, landscape companies)
- **Retail Partnerships:** Commissions or margins from selling compost through retail partners or garden centers
- **Bulk Orders:** Revenue from largescale contracts with commercial clients or municipalities, DOT (Dept of transformation)
- **Subscription Models:** Recurring revenue from subscription services for regular compost deliveries
- Value-Added Products: Sales of premium compost blends or specialty compost-related products; compost tea.
- Educational and Advisory Services: Fees for workshops, consulting, or educational content related to composting

Public-private partnerships (PPPs) can play a crucial role in addressing all the challenges faced in the food and yard waste composting business by leveraging the strengths and resources of both sectors. Here are some ways they can help:

✓ Cost Sharing and Revenue Sharing
✓ Public Engagement and Education
✓ Regulatory and Policy Support
✓ Innovation and Technology

Cost Sharing and Financial Support by PPP

Funding Models

Grants and Subsidies: Governments can provide grants or subsidies to private partners to offset initial costs or support specific aspects of the composting process, such as research and development or the implementation of green technologies.

Tax Incentives: Private partners might receive tax breaks or incentives in exchange for their investment in composting infrastructure or technologies, reducing their overall financial outlay.

Infrastructure Investment and Operational Costs

Capital (comes from investors and In-Kind Contributions (from Govt entity): Both public and private partners can contribute capital to fund the construction or upgrading of composting facilities. For instance, the public sector might provide land or existing infrastructure, users, permitting services or other resources to reduce financial burden, while the private sector might invest in new technology or facility enhancements.

Shared Operating expenses: Costs associated with running composting operations—such as labor, utilities, and maintenance—can be shared between public and private partners according to the agreed terms.. For example, the public sector might cover certain fixed costs, while the private sector handles variable costs related to operations and technical know how.

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Economies of running the business

Composting Facility Costs: (Capital Expenditures)

Developing a composting operation involves high initial CAPEX and a lengthy setup process. The facility must be planned, permitted, designed, built, and operational for about six months before any product can be sold. Initial costs can be partially offset by gate fee revenues, but these are only available once the facility is operational. Financing typically comes from savings, personal contributions, angel investors, and debt, with limited private equity interest.

Debt is repaid from free cash flow, and while government subsidies for composting are limited, expanding grant programs at federal and state levels may offer some support to private companies.

Initial costs include business planning, site design, legal and consulting fees, financing fees, permit preparation, and approval fees. Securing contracts for gate fee materials can be time-consuming, and regulatory requirements vary by feedstock type. Large-scale operations might face \$125,000 to \$250,000 in engineering and permit costs alone.

Facilities need local government approvals for planning, environmental permitting, and zoning, which could be a lengthy process. They also require state environmental permits for waste management, stormwater discharge, and air emissions. The entire approval process, including facility construction and inspection, can take 18 months to three years.

Composting Facility Costs:

(Operating Expenditures)

Composting involves significant operational costs related to handling feedstocks, immature compost, and finished compost. These costs are hard to recover through price adjustments. The efficiency of compost production is improved by minimizing material handling steps. **Key operational expenses include:**

Labor: The largest cost, required for preparing feedstocks, managing compost piles, curing, and processing the final product. Costs range from \$4.00 to \$12.00 per ton, depending on methods, equipment, and regional rates.

Insurance: High premiums for equipments, facility, and unexpected events like flooding, storms and other natural incidents.

Fuel: Often the second-largest expense, particularly for diesel-driven equipment and transportation.

Maintenance: Frequent and sometimes unexpected.

Electricity: Costs range from \$1.05 to \$1.50 per ton, depending on power availability and utility rates.

Permitting: Subject to renewals and local zoning inspections and updates.

Other expenses include debt service on equipment, carbon feedstocks (if purchased), safety and fire controls, business development, and management. Overhead costs cover advertising, bank charges, licenses, utilities, and more. **Net profit margins typically range from 6-8%, with higher margins (10-12%) for facilities with high processing fee contracts.**

Unexpected maintenance costs can significantly impact profitability, with maintenance often consuming 5% of equipment capital costs annually. In Florida, unexpected weather events could also add up to unplanned expenses. Relying on external contractors can further increase costs. Additionally, removing contaminants accounts for about 21% of operating expenses, emphasizing the need for efficient material handling and accurate pricing of finished compost to maintain profitability.

Marketing your business

After launching your composting business, it's vital to implement robust marketing strategies to attract customers and highlight your compost products. **Utilize social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram and create a website for easy access to information about your business.** Also, consider promoting your services through partnerships with local retailers and advertisements in community newspapers to expand your visibility locally.

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To effectively promote your food waste composting business, consider these strategies

- **Social Media:** Use platforms like Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter to showcase your composting process, share tips on sustainable living, and highlight the benefits of using your compost products.
- Local Events and Farmers' Markets: Set up a booth or participate in local events, farmers' markets, or community fairs where you can directly engage with potential customers and educate them about your composting services.
- Website: Create a professional website that not only provides information about your composting services but also includes customer testimonials, educational content on composting, and an easy way for customers to contact you or place orders.
- Local Partnerships: Collaborate with local businesses, community gardens, schools, or environmental organizations that align with your values to cross-promote each other's services or products.
- **Networking:** Attend networking events, join environmental or gardening groups, and participate in workshops or seminars related to sustainability to connect with individuals who may be interested in your composting services.
- Educational Workshops: Host workshops or webinars on composting techniques, sustainability practices, or the benefits of using compost in gardening and farming. This positions you as an expert in your field and attracts potential customers.
- Local Media: Reach out to local newspapers, magazines, and radio stations to pitch your story or offer to write guest articles about composting and its benefits. Local media coverage can significantly increase awareness of your business.
- Word of Mouth: Encourage satisfied customers to spread the word about your composting services through reviews, referrals, and testimonials.

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TRACK, MEASURE AND RE-ITERATE

Tracking and measuring the results of a food waste recycling program involves several key steps and metrics. We provide in this chapter a comprehensive approach to ensure you effectively monitor and evaluate the **success** of your program

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EPA's WARM MODEL

WARM is a tool that provides high-level comparative estimates of the potential GHG emissions, energy savings, and economic impacts of materials managed in baseline and alternative materials management practices.

The model estimates emissions, energy units and economic factors across a wide range of material types commonly found in municipal solid waste and construction and demolition debris in the following categories:

- Metric tons of carbon dioxide equivalent (MTCO2E)
- Energy units (million British Thermal Unit BTU)
- Labor hours,
- Wages (\$)
- Taxes (\$)

WARM is currently available as <u>a downloadable</u> <u>Microsoft Excel spreadsheet</u> on <u>this link</u>

Tracking and Measuring Results

1. Define Objectives and Goals

- **Objectives:** Understand why you're running the program (e.g., reducing landfill waste, improving sustainability).
- **Goals:** Set specific, measurable goals (e.g., reduce food waste by 30% in the first year).

2. Develop Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)

- Amount of Food Waste Diverted: Measure the total weight or volume of food waste diverted from landfills.
- **Cost Savings:** Track reductions in waste disposal costs and potential savings from reduced waste.
- Environmental Impact: Assess reductions in greenhouse gas emissions and other environmental benefits.
- **Participation Rates:** Monitor the number of participants or households involved in the program.
- **Quality of Recycled Material:** Evaluate the quality and purity of the recycled compost or material.

3. Data Collection

- Waste Audits: Conduct regular waste audits to assess the types and quantities of food waste generated.
- **Program Participation Records:** Keep track of the number of businesses, households, or institutions participating.
- **Monitoring Tools:** Use scales and measurement tools to record waste quantities accurately.

4. Analyze and Report

- **Regular Analysis:** Periodically analyze the collected data to determine if you're meeting your goals.
- **Reports:** Prepare detailed reports on performance metrics, trends, and insights.

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Tracking and Measuring Results (Cont.)

5. Feedback and Improvement

- **Feedback Mechanisms:** Gather feedback from participants and stakeholders to identify areas for improvement.
- **Continuous Improvement:** Implement changes based on feedback and performance analysis to enhance the program.

6. Communicate Results

- Internal Communication: Share results with staff and stakeholders to keep everyone informed and motivated.
- **Public Communication:** Highlight achievements and benefits to the community to encourage ongoing participation.

7. Tools and Technologies (covered in detail in the next section)

- Software Solutions: Use waste management software for tracking and analyzing data.
- Smart Bins: Implement smart bins with sensors to monitor waste levels and composition.
- **Data Analytics:** Leverage data analytics tools to gain deeper insights into waste patterns and program effectiveness.

8. Case Studies and Benchmarks

- **Benchmarking:** Compare your program's performance with similar programs or industry standards.
- **Case Studies:** Learn from successful food waste recycling programs in other areas to adopt best practices.

Features to look for in your software tools

Features are crucial for maximizing the scope and ROI of your custom enterprise solution. To ensure you get the most from your software development investment, focus on features that address your business challenges and prepare for the future. Here are key features that can enhance your custom waste management software:

- **Route Optimization:** Determines the most efficient routes for waste collection, saving time and fuel, extending truck lifespan, and increasing productivity.
- **Compliance Tracking:** Ensures adherence to regulations, helps avoid fines, and fosters community trust by keeping waste management practices clean and legal.
- **Document Management:** Centralizes important documents like permits and reports, making them easily accessible and eliminating paper clutter.
- Smart Sorting Capability: Uses advanced sensors and Al to automatically identify and sort waste, improving recycling and reducing contamination.
- Automated Inventory Management: Tracks and manages waste management supplies to ensure availability and reduce downtime.
- **Drone Surveillance:** Provides real-time aerial views of large facilities, detects unusual waste patterns, and optimizes collection routes.
- **Robotics for Waste Collection:** Employs robots for autonomous waste collection in controlled settings, reducing the need for manual intervention.
- Voice-activated Commands: Enhances accessibility by allowing voice commands for users with diverse abilities.
- Integration with Smart City Infrastructure: Syncs with smart city systems to optimize waste collection based on real-time traffic and other city-wide data.
- Weather Forecast Integration: Adjusts collection schedules based on weather forecasts to prepare for adverse conditions.

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Conclusion

Starting a composting business presents a promising opportunity to contribute to environmental sustainability while tapping into a growing market for organic waste management. This white paper highlights the key steps necessary for establishing a successful venture, including conducting thorough market research, understanding regulatory requirements, and implementing effective **operational strategies**. By focusing on these critical areas, entrepreneurs can build a solid foundation for their composting business, ensuring both compliance and operational efficiency.

The benefits of composting extend beyond environmental impact, offering economic advantages through compost sales and potential cost savings on waste disposal. Engaging with local communities, municipalities and staying informed about industry trends will further enhance business success. By following the recommendations outlined in this paper and remaining **adaptable to emerging opportunities**, entrepreneurs can successfully navigate the complexities of starting a composting business and make a meaningful contribution to sustainable waste management and **soil health**.