

Worth Its Weight in Southwest Gold

250 Daily Tons of Paunch Composting a Key Factor In Pursuit of Zero Landfill

What began in 2002 as a process initially aimed at saving money, has grown into a sizeable operation, aimed at significantly reducing waste and creating an environmentally responsible compost product.

And the process is all centered around cattle paunch, 250 daily tons of it.

A quick biology lesson for those who don't know what paunch is.

Cattle paunch is undigested material that remains in the animal's stomach at slaughter, about 41 pounds per head worth. And because we process several thousand cattle a day, that means we also process a lot of paunch, around 250 tons a day between Liberal and Dodge City alone.

That's 500,000 pounds of undigested feed, grass and liquid that needs to be discarded.

And until 2002, it was 500,000 pounds a day that was added to the landfill.

But then, a resourceful meeting took place between Pete Lancaster and Jeff Flowers, both who work in the engineering group at National Beef and Mark Taber, who was running the landfill at that time.

"We were hauling five or six, five-yard dumpsters full of paunch a day, from both Dodge City and Liberal," Jeff Flowers said. "It was a huge cost for us to haul it and dump it in the landfill."

With the initial efforts to reduce costs, the collaborative team uncovered and developed a process—and a product—that has enabled us to touch almost all pillars of sustainability: people, planet, and profits.

And it was then where Paunch Composting began.

With this composting process, not only are we saving money by not paying to dump this enormous amount of material, we've also created a useful product, and we're taking pressure off the landfill.

"As we march toward the pursuit of Zero Landfill, paunch composting is a very important piece of that strategy," said Rob Cannell, Vice President of Research and Development. "For us to have such a clear path to change from a hard cost, to an area to reduce costs and minimize our impact on the environment, is huge. And not only that, to then be able to produce a beneficial, recycled material in the compost is the cherry on top of an already great story."

Here's how it works.

Once it arrives at the landfill (only seconds away from our Liberal plant), the paunch undergoes a seven to nine day "cooking" process. The team at the landfill mixes the paunch and stirs it every day, reducing the volume by 55%. And in turn, they create certified garden grade compost—known to many Westlake Ace Hardware customers (and other local retailers) as Southwest Gold Compost.

"Creating certified garden grade compost isn't necessarily something the general public will relate to with a meat packing organization, but this has been an incredible opportunity to reduce costs, wastes, and create a useful, recyclable material," Flowers added.

While Southwest Gold is still sold in stores, we've taken this a step further and discovered a new use for it, that is both sustainable and solves a problem—using the compost in the landfill itself to further enhance the decomposition efforts in a bigger way.

Landfill cell covers are typically made of plastic, which is less than ideal for the environment because they slow the decomposition of waste cells.

Our team at Liberal and the landfill leadership team put their heads together and came up with a solution that is much better for the environment.

Now, instead of using plastic cell covers, they're covering the cell with a monolithic cap, and laying the paunch compost as a final layer. This allows decomposition in waste cells to happen faster, as opposed to when they're covered with a plastic cap.

It also allows the growth of natural grasses and weeds to take root more quickly, further enhancing the natural, biodegradable process.

"When it comes to Zero Landfill, there's lots more to do, but this has reduced a massive amount of our waste as a company. And it's provided another sustainable, environmental friendly way for us to benefit the communities we serve," concluded Cannell.

The impact annually is tremendous to consider.

41 pounds of paunch per animal results in 18.45 pounds of compost.

250 tons of paunch between Liberal and Dodge on a daily basis, results in 225,000 pounds of compost daily.

365 days of paunch compost production, results in 82,125,000 pounds of compost.

Certainly, a step in the right direction towards Zero Landfill, 41,062 tons worth of steps every year to be exact.



Packaging used for Southwest Gold Certified Garden compost, sold in Westlake Hardware and other retailers in southwest Kansas.