FUTURE OF ORGANIC AMENDMENTS IN CALIFORNIA

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California Assembly Bill 939 requires all state municipalities to divert 25% of their waste from landfills by 1995 and 50% by 2000. Since yard wastes represent a significant component of the waste stream, many areas have opted to collect garbage and yard wastes separately. The yard wastes are then generally processed for land application, either as compost or mulch. These products have many beneficial properties (see Dave Chaney, Laurie Drinkwater, and Stu Pettygrove's timely new CE publication: Organic Soil Amendments and Fertilizers), but they also carry some perceived or actual risks associated with salinity, long-term nitrate pollution, and pathogen control. It is not always clear how these materials are best used on the farm. Currently it is difficult to accurately predict, for example, mineralization rates for composted green waste nitrogen. Furthermore, the large-scale composters who are organizing themselves to process these newly available green materials are not always familiar with the needs of agriculture and related industries when producing and marketing their product. I suggest that UC Cooperative Extension investigate ways of indexing or quantifying the properties of green waste, sewage sludge, and animal manure, and other organic products so that (1) farmers can understand how to use them properly and (2) so that producers of these materials have a target on which to focus their quality control efforts.