

# Grassroots

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## Farmers need options, programs to recycle agricultural plastics

By Chris LaRoe, Contributing Editor

Farmers may soon have viable options for the disposal of some types of plastics used on the farm. With the open burning of agricultural materials becoming a controversial issue in New York State, expansion of alternative means of disposal of agricultural plastics is imperative.

Robert Denny II is a representative of the Ag Container Recycling Council (ACRC), a non-profit organization that collects and recycles crop protection product containers. It is funded by more than 30 member companies that formulate, produce, package, and distribute crop protection products, and are working to conserve resources and keep the environment clean.

According to Denny, economical and practical means of disposing pesticide containers are a problem in many places across the country because of the potentially harmful effects of the product's residue. In parts of the country with a high concentration of these plastics, ACRC has developed programs with scheduled pick-ups, or drop-off locations. All the containers are cleansed extensively, ground into chips, and then sold to a manufacturer who produces suitable products with the recycled plastics. Some examples of the products they have manufactured include pallets, drain tiles, parking stops, and hazardous waste drums.

ACRC has brought the program to Long Island, where it will serve as a pilot program prior to expanding to other areas of the state.

"We recently did an informal survey to give us a better idea of where exactly in the country pesticide stewardship was in need of assistance, and we discovered that New York and Florida were high on the list," said Denny. "Long Island has particular environmental challenges due to shallow groundwater and suburban and urban encroachment. We are confident that this program is going to work and hope to expand to other parts of the state within the year."

Currently, the ACRC program in New York is limited to the collection of plastic containers, but farmers also use other plastics that are difficult to dispose of through means other than burning. The Cortec Corporation has offered one potential solution. Their product, Eco Film, is certified as 100 percent biodegradable and compostable film. It serves as a stretch film alternative and can be used for masking applications, mechanical protection, and corrosion protection.

Cortec claims that once Eco Film is discarded in soil or compost, it will decompose 100 percent into carbon dioxide and water within weeks, and will not devalue or contaminate compost, unlike polyethylene blends.

"Our initial customers required durable, moisture resistant corrosion-inhibiting films to meet stringent environmental regulations. We realized that we could apply our expertise to overcoming the existing issues of compostable films and successfully enter and compete in new markets," said Bob Boyle, technical representative at Cortec. "Eco Film is not just another compostable film. Our testing shows that it is actually stronger than non-biodegradable films and has longer curb-life than other biodegradable films on the market."

"I recently hosted a roundtable meeting where agricultural plastics—and their disposal—was a key part of the discussion," said Assemblyman David Koon, a sponsor of the anti-open burning bill. "Through this event and other outreach efforts I have learned about collaborative plastic recycling programs that are now in their infancy. At the state level it is imperative for our environment and our economy that we support these endeavors so they become valuable resources for farmers. I am encouraged by the development of these programs to promote the recycling of these plastics as a sustainable alternative to burning."

Senator George Maziarz, the Senate sponsor of the bill to ban the burning of household waste, said, "I applaud these programs for tackling this pressing issue. The dilemma of disposing of these agricultural plastics must be resolved. I have heard of industries that collect this material to recycle it into other products, and we need to find feasible ways to build that market for New York State farmers."

One individual who has taken notice of the difficulty of disposing of plastics in the world of agriculture is Dr. Lois Levitan of Cornell University's Environmental Risk Analysis Program. A few years ago, Dr. Levitan was approached by several environmental groups concerned about open burning of refuse both by the general public and those in agriculture. Serving in many ways as a trailblazer in gathering information of this nature, Dr. Levitan and her group talked to farmers and various experts, and found it was clear that farmers lacked options when it came to disposing of ag plastics. Often, landfills would not take the type of plastics used by farmers, and even if they did, farmers said transportation of those materials proved to be difficult. The group released their report in March of 2003.

As a result, Dr. Levitan began developing an infrastructure conducive to recycling ag plastics. She is devoted to working with manufacturers of ag plastics, and manufacturers of products which use recycled ag plastics, to ensure that they are communicating to one another to make the process work smoothly. More findings from Dr. Levitan's research will be released in the fall of this year and will provide invaluable information as to the best ways to spur on a viable recycling program for ag plastics. ■

Return to [June Grassroots Table of Contents](#)

Return to [New York Farm Bureau Home Page](#)