



Onalaska High School Students Combat Food Waste: The Ecovim Project

On a warm September afternoon almost two years ago, a group of six students met in an English classroom to discuss Onalaska High School's food waste problem. The school had a recycling program for paper used in classrooms, but no programs to keep cafeteria waste out of landfills. After considering various options, the students settled on purchasing an Ecovim, a composting machine that processed food waste in twelve hours and came with a very hefty price tag of thirty-two thousand dollars.



The students decided food waste was a problem after learning how food decomposing in a landfill released methane, a greenhouse gas roughly thirty times more potent than carbon dioxide, into the atmosphere and how the nutrients from the food never returned to a useful form. Compost holds onto the nutrients and carbon in food, and as fertilizer, it supplies those materials for the growth of new food, elegantly closing the cycle. The Ecovim machine is particularly remarkable in its ability to process dairy, meats, and bread, big no-nos for backyard composting. With this machine, no food will go to waste.



The students started by making their case to school administrators and the Buildings and Grounds department, the custodians who would end up with the extra work of installing and maintaining this machine. They ran a study to estimate the quantity of food waste produced every day. This year, they applied for a grant from the La Crosse Community Foundation and a grant from the Onalaska Education Foundation. In addition, they organized a fundraiser selling fabric bags made from donated scraps, raising almost fifteen hundred dollars and educating the community on the Ecovim project. These funds, combined with a generous personal donation from the Diermeier family, were sufficient to purchase and install the machine.

Green Council Success

Great news from the Green Council Environmental Club. We have successfully collected the \$32,000 needed to purchase the Ecovim food digester. Our last reusable bag sale put us over the top to meet our goal.

The Ecovim provides technology which dehydrates this food waste in hours. The reduction in volume can be as high as 90%, leaving only 10% of the original mass processed. The output product is a highly concentrated organic soil amendment which can be used as fertilizer, bio-fuel and animal feed.



Excerpt from "Freddy's Footnotes" Onalaska High School Newsletter April 2020

Right before Covid-19 changed the world seemingly overnight, the group of students, now an official club with over sixty members on the mailing list and around twenty active members, had raised all of the money needed. The school was on track to have the machine set up and operating before May graduation. Currently, the machine is set up and will begin operating once students and teachers know how sorting food will fit into all the other adjustments coming this fall.



Even in the era of online learning, when many students began to slacken on their classes, a core group of students remained dedicated enough to continue meeting over Zoom for planning the next step: teaching the student body how to sort their lunch waste. There are many uncertainties about how sorting will look this fall, tangled with all the uncertainties of the fall reopening in general. Fortunately, committed students, an advisor unwavering in her efforts to coordinate this project, and a supportive principal and teachers give reason to keep faith in this project.

While the Ecovim project may seem frivolous in the time of Covid-19, it is anything but. At a macro scale, this project is a small piece of a global puzzle in averting our next great crisis, and at a micro scale, this project empowers individual students with the knowledge that they can and have made a positive, significant, thirty-two thousand dollar change in their community. Seeing this project through in these uncertain times would be a testament to a community's ability to build back better, and the hardest part is already over for these students who worked so hard to make a difference for the environment.

About the blogger:



Tracy Zhou is a sophomore studying environmental economics at Yale University, and she will be taking online classes from her Onalaska home this fall. She hopes to eventually work with environmental policy as a career. Her other interests include history, pottery, and fiction novels—particularly fantasy novels written for preteens. When she's not binging a tv show, she loves going on walks and bike trips and making tasty food.