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Setting new standards



The group's FOGO service generated more than 45,000 tonnes of food and garden organics, all of which are being recycled into compost for farms.

By Jacqueline Ong

IF their current downward trend in landfilling is anything to go by, come June 2018, NSW's Albury City Council, Federation Council, and Greater Hume Shire as well as Victoria's Indigo Shire, Towong Shire, and the City of Wodonga will come close to hitting their target of a 50% reduction in household waste sent to landfill. This is an amazing feat, considering few, if any, councils have achieved such a massive improvement in landfill diversion. Additionally, the initial plan was to meet this 50% reduction target (a little more than 180,000 tonnes) by 2020.

The success of these councils' landfill diversion efforts is in large part due to Halve Waste, a public awareness and education program launched in 2010 and delivered with assistance by MRA Consulting Group to engage the whole community in efforts to reduce waste and increase recycling. Albury City Council (ACC) has taken the lead in the project as its Waste Management Centre (AWMC) is the central facility for waste disposal for the six participating councils.

The decision to introduce the program was driven largely by the sheer amount of material sent to landfill - 75% of all waste. As almost no recycling was occurring at the time and no waste education program existed within the region, ACC saw a need to better engage the community to drive active recycling.

Together, the group developed a strategy to introduce Halve Waste and because every council was on the same page, there were few challenges in setting up the initiative, with ACC taking the lead in encouraging the adoption of the 50% target as well as determining a

self-imposed levy placed on landfilled waste - this levy was then used to fund Halve Waste.

Today, ACC oversees the Halve Waste initiative, reporting to the group on a regular basis. The councils also meet regularly to determine programs that factor into the yearly project plan of the initiative.

Too ambitious, they said

From the very onset, the six councils agreed that for any impact to be felt, a high target should be imposed. However, this was met with scepticism from industry personnel who questioned if reducing waste to landfill by 50% was achievable. Councils were undeterred however, and explained to their regional communities that if a change didn't occur, airspace would soon be completely used up which would then lead to other cost implications.

It is important to note that the group didn't just set a high target. They backed that up with a significant amount of infrastructure improvements and non-infrastructure services such as the discontinuation of annual hard waste collections and the removal of free entry days at the AWMC to ensure that each element of the program, including education, would go hand-in-hand because they were well aware that there would be little point in encouraging the community to recycle without the proper avenues to make that happen.

To give Halve Waste the best shot at success, a comprehensive engagement program was also developed, which included stakeholder engagement, education officers working with schools, businesses, and the community, advertising campaigns, large-scale public awareness media campaigns, program sponsorships and funding.



The councils' three-bin FOGO system has a 90% take-up rate with 50,000 households participating across the Albury, Wodonga, Indigo, and Federation council areas. (Credit: Albury City Council)

New initiatives

Since 2012, ACC has introduced a range of new initiatives to boost resource recovery, including:

- mattress recycling;
- refrigeration de-gassing and recycling;
- ferrous and non-ferrous metal recycling;
- polystyrene recycling;
- electronic waste recycling for televisions and computers; and
- soft furnishing recycling.

Introducing FOGO

One of the services the group introduced was a food and garden organics bin service at no extra cost to the community. At the time, ACC was part of a kerbside collection service that worked with five other councils and four opted to also implement a FOGO service. This buy-in and support from the four councils' management was critical in its success.

Following a community-based social marketing model, which has had proven success in bringing about behaviour change in communities, the group worked extensively in 2012 with its waste collection contractor Cleanaway to roll out the new service. As part of this model, the group selected the behaviours they wanted their communities to adopt,

identified barriers and benefits to those behaviours, developed strategies to work around those benefits and barriers, and piloted the strategy with a sample group within the community. This was then followed by the full roll-out and subsequent evaluation of the impacts of the new service, including reviews, observations, surveys and focus groups.

The group also set up a "green team", which ran a call centre for queries and allocated staff to visit householders who found the change challenging. While the team was only in place at the start - during the introduction of the FOGO service, the community continues to receive support from council staff, contractors, and education officers who are able to assist if and when an issue arises.

Today, the group boasts a 90%

take-up rate of the three-bin service with 50,000 households participating across the Albury, Wodonga, Indigo, and Federation council areas. The service has also generated more than 45,000 tonnes of food and garden organics, all of which are being recycled into compost for farms.

Overall, success of the program to date can be largely attributed to a number of factors - the self-imposed levy that helped fund the education program, buy-in from all participating councils which led to economies of scale, the ability to fund infrastructure improvements to effect change, a well-planned capital program, and the right personnel to drive change.

Upwards and onwards

For now, it is business as usual for the

group, with education and infrastructure improvements ongoing. However, the six councils will always keep an eye out for cost-effective and innovative options for the community and acknowledge that other materials such as biosolids, which council is looking to divert to other locations, will be considered in the future when volumes of these waste streams increase.

The group also intends to do more around industrial ecology locally and examine energy. Plastics is also on their radar as it is a growing concern that needs both management and solutions.

Acknowledgement: Inside Waste would like to thank Albury City Council for providing information on the Halve Waste initiative. 

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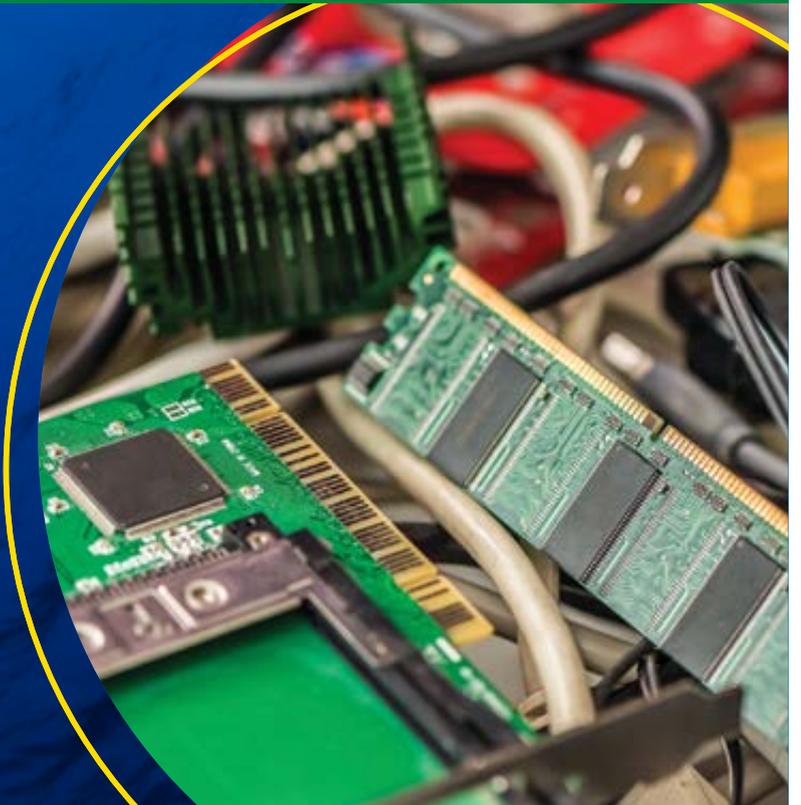
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