



## Replenish program completes circle of life for the restaurant fare

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Every night, thousands of people dine at restaurants in Sussex County, Del., particularly in the summer. And every night, thousands of plates with food waste get scraped into garbage cans, where they are hauled away and added to the landfill – a landfill that isn't getting any bigger, but is certainly getting much fuller.

Enter Replenish, a new project launching this summer by the Energize Delaware Now (EDEN) program, a branch of the Delmarva Community Wellnet Foundation. Through partnerships with area eating establishments, Replenish aims to drastically reduce the amount of food waste entering county landfills and, instead, direct it to an eco-friendly path.

"We believe we need to, in the future, create an eco-efficient economy," said Wellnet Executive Director D.C. Kuhns, "which means we need to be sensitive to conserving more and consuming less."

Once the organic matter is col-

lected from the restaurant of its origin, it is sent to Blue Hen Organics in Dagsboro, Del., the only location in the county certified by the Delaware Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control to receive food waste, according to Dr. Kim Furtado, a Wellnet staff member and one of the coordinators of the effort.

"Blue Hen Organics has had a compost facility for about 13 months," said Blue Hen Organics Vice-President Robert Tunnell III.

While the site has been accepting drop-offs from the public, Tunnell said, they wanted to participate in the program so they could go out in the community and start a collection program that would include both restaurants and grocery stores.

By making organic waste into compost, instead of having it decompose in a landfill, Kuhns said, greenhouse gasses stay trapped in the cycle instead of being released into the atmosphere.

At the facility, the organic matter is mixed with yard waste, also collected and dropped off at Blue Hen, to form a compost mixture that is then sold as an all-natural fertilizer at several area

stores.

Kuhns said a goal of the program would be to have that fertilizer used to grow food that would show up on the same tables of the restaurants the raw materials had been collected from previously.

"Basically, we're trying to localize the creation of organic fertilizer," Tunnell said of his company's involvement.

But Furtado said being environmentally friendly isn't the only incentive restaurants should have to participate in Replenish.

"It's an environmental problem with a business solution," she said.

While it costs \$82 per ton (as of July 1) to haul any type of waste to the landfill, it only costs \$40 a ton to haul organic waste to Blue Hen.

Tunnell said those who participate see a 10 to 20 percent reduction in their waste bill.

But both Furtado and Tunnell recognized that the switch to organic waste recycling won't happen overnight.

"It takes a little more on the front end, where you have to change the

culture in the kitchen," said Tunnell.

Alison Blyth, owner of GoFish! in Rehoboth Beach, Del., said her business is eager to get involved and is just waiting to figure out the logistics of waste separation in the kitchen and pick-up.

"I'm all about protecting the environment," she said, explaining that she already recycles her fry oil so it can be converted into bio-diesel fuel.

Blyth said she also wanted to participate to show her 10-year-old son that she was doing her part to help the planet.

"It's a win-win for everyone," she said. "It helps you save money on your trash bill and puts it back into the environment."

In addition to GoFish!, other area restaurants that have signed up include El Dorado's in Rehoboth Beach, Bluecoast Seafood Grill in Bethany Beach and all three Arena's locations in Lewes and Rehoboth. But Furtado said they aren't stopping there.

"We're hoping for 50 by the end of the year," she said.

Kuhns said EDEN has been using

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connections through the Rehoboth Beach and Dewey Beach Chamber of Commerce, walking along streets and looking for restaurants with high organic waste volume and talking to restaurant owners to recruit more to join Replenish.

“And the Chamber has endorsed our program,” he said. “And the Chamber has agreed to help us reach out to their member restaurants.”

By helping restaurants save money, Kuhns said Replenish is doing the local economy a great service. He said that, in peak season, Rehoboth Beach sees 50,000 visitors each week during the summer, but 90 percent of local restaurant endeavors end in failure.

“If we can give them an edge, then we’re doing a good thing, not only for the Earth, but also for economic development,” he said, adding that people in this area tend to be more green-conscious and support businesses that take green initiatives.

The Replenish program is funded by grants from the Longwood Foundation, DNREC and Delaware’s Energy Office’s Greenhouse Gas Reduction Program and Constellation Energy, through its Ecostar Grant Program. The total funds awarded amount to \$105,000.