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Case study—successful landscape supplies business expands into composting

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Overview of the landscaping supplies business

Mr and Mrs A, owners of company B[1], run a successful business specialising in the supply of bulk landscaping materials.

The business is located in coastal New South Wales, and manufactures a range of bulk products from pre-processed materials brought to the site.

"We manufacture pine bark products, potting mixes, organic soils, top dressing soils, manures, compost, woodchip and mulches" Mr A said.

"Presently, a variety of materials are bought in and blended to manufacture our specialist products which are sold mainly to landscaping companies, large nurseries and growers of horticultural produce" said Mr A.

Mr A stated that many of the products are manufactured from valuable by-products generated from local industries in coastal New South Wales. Some we have to buy, but others we bring in ourselves. These include sawdust, pine bark, crusher dust, sand, mushroom compost, manure and other fine wood-based materials.

The site is located on a 0.6 hectare parcel of land zoned as light industrial, with close neighbours. The business has been operating at the site since 1991.

"Soon after we bought the vacant land in 1991, we lined most of the site with surplus concrete produced by a local concrete supplier. This allows us to use equipment in all weather conditions, and collect surface runoff" Mr A said.

Plans to expand the site and start composting

In mid 1999 company B decided to expand the range of products supplied to their bulk customers. The company decided to investigate the feasibility of composting approximately 3000 tonnes per annum of softwood and hardwood sawdust on-site.

"Due to the lack of space, we had to look for a nearby site to set up the composting operation, which would be based on the use of open-air, mechanically *turned piles*" Mr A said.

A six-hectare parcel of land behind the current site was chosen for its proximity to set up the composting operation.

The adjacent site, however, is zoned as rural land and is located on a water aquifer and within a water catchment area. The site is also covered by remnant native vegetation which would need to be partly cleared if the development went ahead.

To see what type of development approval was needed to set up the site, the company contacted local council. Council set up a preliminary development application meeting. At that stage, it was realised that a development application was needed as the proposed activity was considered to be a designated development in terms of Schedule 3

[1] To avoid impacts on company B's development application, the business upon which this case study is based has deliberately been made anonymous.

Plate 1. Photograph of materials supplied by company B's current operation in coastal New South Wales.

of the Environmental Planning and Assessment Regulation Act (2000).

Council was enthusiastic about the project, however, because the site is located in a sensitive water catchment area, council advised that an *Environmental Impact Statement (EIS)* was needed in addition to the development application for this *designated development* — due to the potential for environmental impacts.

Council and government authorities advised as to the content of the EIS. Impacts on the following issues needed to be addressed: flora and fauna, aboriginal heritage issues, water, air and noise.

Company B decided to pursue the preparation of the EIS, and contracted a reputable company with a proven track record in the field.

Mr A said "The EIS took about two and a half months to do, and we realised in the final stages of the preparation of the EIS that very expensive site investigations and works were needed to minimise impacts on the environment, and to get the proposal up."

For the development to be approved, it needed to be roofed, with an impermeable surface and advanced water collection and treatment system.

Mr A said "It was just going to be too expensive to set up the site as a composting facility. Unfortunately, we spent a considerable amount of effort and money on a site that really didn't have a chance in being approved for our use."

"If we had our time over again, we'd look for a site that was more suited to our needs, and avoid sensitive sites that required an EIS" Mr A said.

Valuable experiences gained produces success

After the set-back from the previous attempt to gain approval to develop a composting facility, company B explored the feasibility of setting up a composting facility at a different location.

"We came across a rehabilitated quarry site approximately 18 km away from our current operation" said Mr A.

Mr A said "The site appears to be excellent for the establishment of an open-air turned pile composting facility. The old quarry site had been rehabilitated with native grass species, with some native trees. Surrounding the entire site is native bushland, which will provide an excellent visual and sound buffer."

"Also, the site has a gentle slope to allow the collection and treatment of run-off, and the sub-soil is an impermeable clay and gravel base, meaning the surface and groundwater quality can be maintained."

The site is approximately 30 hectares in size, and the only neighbour is a large gravel quarry which has been operating in the area for some years.

Preliminary consultation with the local council has been supportive.

Due to the size of the operation, however, council requested company B submit a development application and a *statement of environmental effects (SEE).*

An SEE is a much shorter and less involved document than an EIS.

The SEE, which is being produced by their consultants, will address water related issues.

Company B hopes to start their new composting operation in the next few months.

Definitions

Turned Pile[1]

System of composting involving the periodic turning of piles of organic matter with mechanical equipment (e.g. front-end loaders or specialised windrow turners) between 1.5 and 3 m in height. Turning assists in: aeration and oxygen re-supply; eliminating odours; reducing consolidation, and moisture and nutrient re-distribution.

Environmental Impact Statement (EIS)[2]

A document, prepared by the proponent, describing a proposed activity or development and identifying the possible, probable, or certain effects of the proposal on the environment; examining the alternatives to the proposal; setting out the mitigation measures to be adopted; proposing a program of environmental management; provisions for monitoring, auditing and plans for decommissioning and rehabilitation.

Designated Development[3]

Developments that involve heavy industry with high pollution potential. Designated developments require the submission of an environmental impact statement and approval before consent can be granted. A list of designated developments can be found in Schedule 3 of the Environmental Planning and Assessment Regulation Act (2000).

Statement of Environmental Effects (SEE)[4]

A document whose purpose is to specify: the environmental impacts of the development; how the environmental impacts of the development have been identified; and the steps to be taken to protect the environment or to lessen the expected harm to the environment.

[1]Recycled Organics Unit (2002).
[2]Gilpin (1995).
[3]Farrier *et al.* (1999).
[4]Environmental Planing and Assessment Regulation (2000).

Important references

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