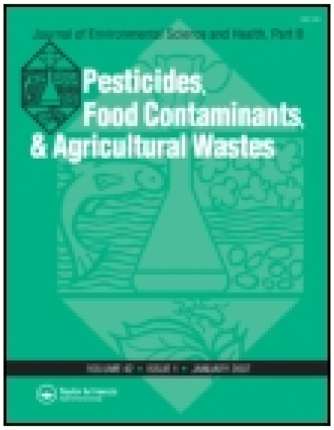

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Assessment of a composting process for the treatment of beef cattle manure

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The intensive breeding of beef cattle in Juncosa de les Garrigues (Catalonia, Spain) leads to the production of a large volume of manure that needs appropriate management. Land application in the area at agronomic rates is not enough to ensure good management practices, making necessary extended on-farm storage and the export of part of the production to long distances. In this context, the implementation of a collective treatment based on composting could help in enhancing the handling of manure. We assessed a full-scale composting process based on turned windrows (W), and involving treatment of beef cattle manure (CM) alone (two typologies were considered according to carbon-to-nitrogen ratios of ~25 (CM1, W1) and ~14 (CM2, W2)), or mixed with bulking agent (CM2/BA, W3) and dewatered digested sewage sludge (CM2/BA/DDSS, W4). Composting significantly improved the transportability of nutrients (final volumes were 40–54% of the initial volume). Temperature >55°C was reached in all the treatments but following different time patterns. Under the applied conditions of turning and rewetting, 14 weeks of processing did not ensure the production of stable, and mature, compost. Thus, only compost from W1 attained the maximum degree of stability as well as concentration of ammonium–N < 0.01% (with ammonium–N/nitrate–N ratio of 0.2) and low phytotoxicity. However, high pH, salinity, and heavy metal contents (Cu and Zn) may limit its final use. Addition of BA was advised to be kept to minimum, whereas use of DDSS as a co-substrate was not recommended in agreement to the higher loss of N and levels of heavy metals in the final compost.

Keywords: Organic waste management, cattle manure, composting, compost, nutrient recycling, agricultural value.

Introduction

Cattle manure (CM) is produced in large amounts in the breeding facilities of Juncosa de les Garrigues (Catalonia, Spain).[1] In this municipality more than 9,000 beef calves are fattened per year, which leads to an annual manure production of more than 20,000 Mg. In this context, appropriate land application of manure at agronomic rates must be assured to preserve the environmental quality of agricultural ecosystems, atmosphere, and water resources. The low requirements of local rainfed agriculture in fertilization (mainly comprising the cropping of almond and olive trees), coupled with the difficulty in accessing part of the existing crop fields due to terrain's topography (slopes, terraces, etc.), make necessary extended storage on the farms and the export of part of production to long distances. Thus, it would be interesting to consider the implementation of a collective low-technology treatment that could help in reducing the volume of manure to be managed while enhancing its properties, resulting in the production of a material which is easier to handle and transport. In this regard, among the available technologies to treat manure,[2] composting is attractive because it allows producing a value-added product (compost) for the recycling of organic matter (OM) and nutrients.

Indeed, composting is a widely applied process when dealing with organic solid waste management.[3] It comprises biological decomposition and stabilization of organic by-products under conditions that allow the development of thermophilic temperatures as a result of biologically produced heat to produce a final product that is stable and free of pathogens and plant seeds, and can be beneficially applied to land.[4] Aeration and moisture are required to be supplied to attain good process performance. Aeration can be provided either by mechanical turning or by means of forced aeration. Use of bulking agent (BA) will increase convective airflow through windrows. On the other hand, rewetting is usually required to compensate the large quantity of water that evaporates during composting and to maintain the optimum moisture content (MC) for microbial activity. In this regard, too high MCs result in undesired anaerobic conditions, while

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very low contents cause early dehydration, which will stop the process.

The quality of compost is dependent on many factors such as feedstock sources and proportions used, composting procedure, and length of maturation. It can be evaluated according to physical, chemical, and biological criteria.[5–7] Physical parameters include temperature, MC, bulk density, particles size, porosity, and airflow resistance as well as thermal, electrical, mechanical, and optical properties. Chemical criteria focus on the composition, and particularly on the content of nutrients, water soluble extract, presence of heavy metals and organic pollutants, OM quality, cation exchange capacity, etc. Finally, biological criteria include microbial activity indicators based on the monitoring of respiration or enzyme activity as well as phytotoxicity tests. The quality of compost determines the marketing potential of the product. Compost can be employed as soil amendment and fertilizer in agriculture[8] and landscaping,[9] and also as growing media in horticulture[10] and gardening.[11] Features of good quality compost are stability (and maturity) and sufficiently low salinity and heavy metal contents. Immature or poorly stabilized compost may have adverse effects on seed germination and/or plant growth due to the presence of phytotoxic compounds.[12,13]

Composting has been reported as an alternative for manure management in beef cattle farms[14,15] instead of fresh handling or stockpiling.[16] On-farm factors, such as operational practices, bedding, and climate, will significantly affect the characteristics of CM (i.e. MC, carbon-to-nitrogen ratio (C/N), etc.) and thus the composting process itself.[17] Manure sources suitable for composting include solid dung, separated solid fractions, and settled sludges.[18] Mixture with a vegetable-based substrate may be appropriate to give the product structure as well as an increased C/N ratio. Liquid manures should be processed in advance through a solid–liquid separation treatment,[10,13,19,20] unless only small amounts are added to the composting blend. Ammonia (NH_3) volatilization from mixtures with a high initial ammonium–N content can be difficult to avoid during composting.[15,18] Although a variety of materials can be employed as bedding materials; in farms, use of cereal straw is rather common and many composting experiences have been described using such farmyard manure/bedding mixture.[21–24] Otherwise straw can also be supplied as a composting co-substrate,[25,26] but since it is expensive, cost can limit its use. Blend of farmyard manure with other by-products prior to composting is also feasible,[27–29] but appropriateness, availability of materials in the geographical area, and reasonable costs should be guaranteed. In this regard, co-composting may even imply an economic income for manure processing facilities.

The objective of this work was to assess a composting process based on turned windrows and involving treatment of beef CM. Effect of farmyard manure typology, addition of BA, and use of dewatered digested sewage sludge (DDSS) as co-substrate were considered. The quality of the produced compost was evaluated in terms of stability, chemical composition, and agricultural value. The assessment described here was carried out in the framework of a study for the farmers of Juncosa de les Garrigues.

Materials and methods

Feedstocks used for composting

Table 1 shows the composition of feedstocks used in the composting experiment. Manure was collected from different beef cattle farms of Juncosa de les Garrigues, where straw was used as bedding material. Two typologies of CM were considered according to their initial C/N ratio: typical value[1] (CM2; source: fattening calves; C/N ~ 14) and high value[1] (CM1; source: highly bedded young calves; C/N ~ 25). DDSS was obtained from the Waste Water Treatment Plant (WWTP) of Lleida (Catalonia). Sewage sludge from primary and secondary clarifiers is treated in mesophilic anaerobic digesters for biogas production and subsequently dewatered by means of centrifuge decanters. DDSS was tested as co-substrate because there is availability of such by-product in the area, and potentially it might imply an economic income (coming from the WWTP) while supplying water and nutrients to the composting mixture. The BA comprised hammer-milled municipal tree pruning waste from the city of

Table 1. Physicochemical characteristics of the feedstocks used for composting (results except the MC, pH, and EC are expressed on a dry weight basis).

Parameter	*CM1*	*CM2*	*DDSS*
MC (%)	68.7	65.6	76.6
pH	8.8	8.6	8.3
EC (dS m^{-1})	8.2	6.5	3.8
OM (%)	79.8	72.8	45.6
Org-N (%)	1.64	2.36	3.73
NH_4^+–N (%)	0.20	0.70	2.18
NO_3^-–N (%)	0.01	<0.01	<0.01
C/N ratio	25.2	13.8	4.5
P (%)	0.78	0.72	2.63
K (%)	3.44	2.76	0.46
Cu (mg kg^{-1})	11.4	60.5	267
Zn (mg kg^{-1})	157	520	693
Cd (mg kg^{-1})	nm	0.1	0.9
Cr (mg kg^{-1})	nm	<11	153
Hg (mg kg^{-1})	nm	nd	1.93
Ni (mg kg^{-1})	nm	nd	27
Pb (mg kg^{-1})	nm	nd	60

CM: cattle manure; DDSS: dewatered digested sewage sludge; EC: electrical conductivity; MC: moisture content; nd: not detected; nm: not measured; OM: organic matter; Org-N: organic nitrogen.

Lleida. Use of BA was evaluated because it influences the aeration of windrows during the composting process.

Composting procedure

Four composting windrows were prepared using CM alone: Windrows 1 (W1, CM1) and 2 (W2, CM2), CM mixed with BA – windrow 3 (W3, CM2/BA), and CM mixed with DDSS and BA – windrow 4 (W4, CM2/DDSS/BA) (Table 2). Experiments were carried out at the Catalan Municipal Waste Treatment Centers (MWTCs) of the Baix Camp County (Botarell) (W1) and the Segrià County (Montoliu de Lleida) (W2, W3, and W4). Feedstocks were transported to the MWTCs by trucks. Windrows were prepared into paved and covered open buildings using a front-end loader. In W3 and W4, the materials to be composted were piled together targeting the volumetric ratios shown in Table 2, and subsequently mixed using a windrow turner. Raw materials were weighed before being piled. The resulting windrows were 1.3 ± 0.2-m high and 2.9 ± 0.2-m wide at the base, and varied in length from 9 to 13 m. Windrows were turned occasionally for aeration (roughly once a week, except for W1 for the first 3 weeks when turning was 4 days per week) (Fig. 1) by means of a windrow turner. Besides, the windrows were rewetted with water to provide moisture and maintain its content between 40 and 65% (w/w)[17] throughout the experimental period (14 weeks).

Process monitoring

Temperature of the windrows was measured manually. It was averaged considering four measuring points per windrow (80-cm depth). Temperature was measured using a 638 Pt digital thermometer and a Pt100 penetration probe – 1-m long – (Crison Instruments S.A., Alella, Spain). Mean daily air temperatures during the experimental period were obtained from weather stations located less than 10 km from the study sites. These temperatures were averaged to 21.9°C (ranging from 14.2 to 26.0°C) in the case of W1, and 16.3°C (ranging from 7.3 to 27.8°C) in the rest of the cases. Weekly, the MC in the windrows was measured gravimetrically after drying a fresh sample at 105°C up to a constant weight (three replicates). Volume of the windrows was estimated once per month according to length, width, and height measurements, and expressed in relative terms (percentage of the initial values). Samples of feedstocks used for physicochemical characterization were obtained after receiving the feedstocks in the corresponding treatment center. Samples of compost used for physicochemical characterization, stability, and biological tests were obtained after screening the compost and discarding 15-mm larger particles.

Compost quality

Stability. Compost stability was evaluated qualitatively according to the Dewar self-heating test[30,31] (two replicates). The principle of this method is to record the highest temperature achieved after placement of compost into a standardized vessel for several days. Interpretation of the results is based on division into five levels of 10°C increments of the compost heating over ambient, ranging from Class I (40–50°C or more) to Class V (0–10°C).

Physicochemical analyses. The pH and electrical conductivity (EC) at 25°C were measured using a pH-meter and a conductimeter, respectively, in a 1:5 (w/w) extract made with deionized water. OM was determined gravimetrically after ignition of a dry sample in a muffle furnace at 550°C. Organic nitrogen (Org-N) was determined using the Kjeldahl method based on the digestion of a dry sample, distillation, and final titration.[31,32] Total ammonium (NH_4^+) was determined by the distillation of a fresh sample diluted in water, and subsequent titration.[33] Nitrates (NO_3^-) were determined by ion chromatography[34] in a 1:5 (w/w) water extract from a fresh sample. The C/N ratio was estimated considering C as organic-C (0.58 × OM)[13] and N as Org-N plus NH_4^+–N. Phosphorus (P) and potassium (K), as well as cadmium (Cd), chromium (Cr), copper (Cu), nickel (Ni), lead (Pb), and zinc (Zn), were determined by emission spectroscopy using the inductively coupled plasma (ICP) method after microwave-assisted acid digestion of a dry sample.[33,34] Analogously, mercury (Hg) was determined using the cold-vapor atomic fluorescence spectrometric (CVAFS) method.[35]

Biological tests. A modified germination test was carried out to evaluate phytotoxicity problems linked to the use of compost.[36] A filter paper was placed inside Petri dishes

Table 2. Mixtures of materials to be composted.

Windrow	*Materials*	*Targeted Volumetric Ratio*	*Weight (Mg)*
W1	CM1		20
W2	CM2		9.3
W3	CM2/BA	1:1	10.3:1.8
W4	CM2/DDSS/BA	1:1:1	7.4:11.0:1.4

BA: bulking agent; CM: cattle manure; DDSS: dewatered digested sewage sludge; W: windrow.

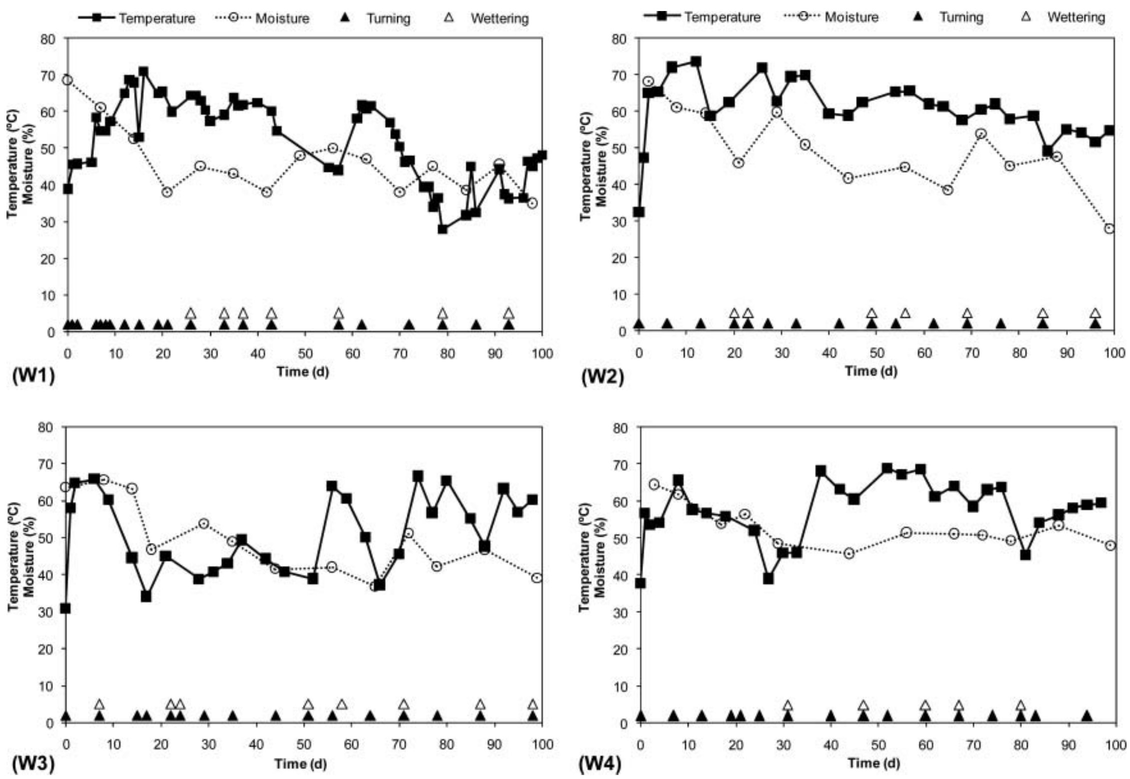

Fig. 1. Evolution of temperature and moisture content (MC) in the composting windrows (W).

and wetted with 5 mL of compost/water extract in a ratio of 1:5 (w/w). Then 10 seeds of lettuce (*Lactuca sativa* L.) were placed on the paper. Deionized water was used as a control and all experiments were run in quadruplicate. The Petri dishes were covered with a bell to minimize water loss, and were incubated at 20°C under a daily cycle of 8 h light/16 h dark. The filter paper was kept moist throughout the test. At the end of seven days, the percentage of seed germination in compost extract was compared with that of the water control and expressed in relative terms as germination percentage.

A modified growing test was carried out to evaluate vegetal response to the use of compost.[31] The test was conducted in 500-mL plastic pots using certified barley seeds (*Hordeum vulgare* L.). Pots were filled with compost mixed with a reference substrate (peat) at a ratio of 0, 25, and 50% (in volume) and watered with 18:20:20 (N/P/K) nutrient solution to obtain 150-mg N L^{-1} substrate. After a short period of time, to allow the surplus of water to drain, 10 seeds were sown in each pot. All experiments were run in quadruplicate. The planted pots were kept in a greenhouse located at the Campus of the University of Lleida, where they were regularly watered. At the end of 21 days, the plants were harvested by cutting them off between the root and stalk, and the dry weight (at 65°C) was recorded. The vegetal yield in the tested substrates (25–50% compost mixtures) was expressed as the percentage of yield in the peat control.

Statistical analyses

Data concerning biological tests were subjected to analysis of variance. The separation of mean values was done by the Duncan's multiple range test ($\alpha = 0.05$). The statistical analysis was done using the statistical package SAS.[37]

Results and discussion

Process monitoring

Temperatures in all the experimental windrows reached the thermophilic range (above 55°C) (Fig. 1), which is indicative of intense microbial activity linked to the degradation of organic compounds. The attainment of high temperatures during composting increases the likelihood of better destruction of pathogens, parasites, and weed seeds.[15] In this regard, the US EPA[38] has stated as a guideline for pathogen elimination during biosolid windrow composting temperatures of 55°C or higher for 15 days or longer (during this period, the windrow must be turned for a minimum of five times). Maximum temperatures attained in this work were 71.0°C for W1, 73.6°C for W2, 66.6°C for W3, and 68.9°C for W4. However, time-dependent temperature profiles varied according to the treatment applied. It was not always possible to identify the usual pattern[10,19,24] of a thermophilic phase followed by a mesophilic phase. In addition, temperatures might fluctuate greatly throughout the experiment as previously reported in similar studies.[26] On the other hand, the MC in the windrows was significantly lower at the end of the process than it was initially even though the multiple rewetting events were applied (Fig. 1).

The slowest initial temperature increase was in W1 (it took six days to attain temperatures above 55°C), probably because of the more frequent windrow turning during the first days of the experiment. The averaged temperature of the windrow exceeded 55°C in 45% of the days with data, and lower temperatures were obtained at the end of the experiment (the temperature upturns observed at this point may be explained by the rewetting events applied). In W2, the temperature rose faster than in W1, attaining the maximum value and then initiating a progressive decrease throughout the experimental period but not below 49°C (temperature exceeded 55°C in 74% of the days with data). A lower initial turning frequency may have reduced the composting rate[39] and resulted in a longer thermophilic phase (in spite of lower C/N ratio of CM2). A systematic turning schedule according to temperature registers, as used, for example, by Cáceres et al.,[10] would help in enhancing the control over the process operation. In the case of W3, temperature increased similarly as in case of W2 but then fell down below 49°C for several weeks. Afterwards temperatures into the thermophilic range were recovered and maintained until the end of the experiment (temperature exceeded 55°C in 46% of the days with data). Hence, blending of CM with BA (at a volumetric ratio of 1:1), targeting increase in the porosity of the windrow for a better aeration by natural convection, limited the attainment of temperatures above 55°C. This behavior could be explained because of the lower capability of the windrow for heat retention and the non-reduction of turning frequency with respect to W2. Use of BA may also help in conditioning high MC materials (such as sewage sludge),[40] but this is not necessarily applicable here, as manures to be processed had MCs below 70%. Thus, it is advisable to keep the use of BA to minimum to save running costs and space in the composting facility. Finally, temperature in W4 did not follow a clear trend, exceeding 55°C in 69% of the days with data.

High temperatures at the end of the experimental period of 14 weeks (particularly in W2, W3, and W4) would make advisable for a longer time frame before stopping the process. Similar composting experiences (involving the formation of turned windrows for CM treatment) considered variable processing times depending on the case study, with active decomposition periods lasting for 8 to 21 weeks, which could be followed by maturation period comprising several months.[16,21–27] Inappropriate duration of the global process will have negative effects on the quality of the produced compost, resulting in a poorly stabilized and immature material with a limited potential use.[7] Thus, temperature drop to ambient level (while assuring appropriate MC) should be prioritized as an indicator of completion of active decomposition period[17] in relation to other operational criteria such as processing time length (e.g. linked to space availability in the treatment facility).

Table 3. Evolution of the relative volume (% of initial value) for the composting windrows (W).

Time (weeks)	*W1*	*W2*	*W3*	*W4*
1	100	100	100	100
4	83	77	66	86
9	68	59	60	54
14	54	47	40	41

The volume of the windrows decreased sharply throughout the experiment. Final volume of the windrows accounted for only 40–54% of the initial volume (Table 3). This reduction is consistent with the values reported by other authors,[13,21] being mainly attributable to the conversion of organic compounds into carbon dioxide (CO_2), loss of moisture, and reduction of particle size during composting. Such reduction in volume (and consequent mass loss) results in the concentration of mineral fraction, which helps to increase the transportability of final product (compared with fresh manure) for exporting nutrients to long distances.[41]

Compost quality

Stability. Once the process was finalized, only compost from W1 reached the maximum degree of stability in the self-heating test (Table 4). Poorly stabilized composts can pose problems during storage, shipping, or use. The material may become anaerobic and odorous, and may develop toxic compounds. Active decomposition of the material after application to soil or addition to growing media can impair plant growth by reducing root-available oxygen, plant-available nitrogen, or through release of phytotoxic compounds into the root zone.[42]

Chemical composition. Table 5 shows the main physicochemical characteristics of the final compost obtained from the four treatments applied. The pH values were neutral to alkaline depending on the particular case. Final pH

Table 4. Results of the self-heating test at the end of the composting process.

Compost	*Class*
W1	V
W2	III
W3	III
W4	IV

W: windrow.

Table 5. Physicochemical characteristics of the final composts (results except the MC, pH, and EC are expressed on a dry weight basis).

Parameter	*Compost*			
	W1	*W2*	*W3*	*W4*
MC (%)	34.8	24.2	18.2	24.5
pH	9.3	8.0	8.0	7.2
EC (dS m^{-1})	14.7	15.4	12.4	8.4
OM (%)	66.6	52.4	55.7	35.9
Org-N (%)	2.63	2.85	2.82	2.15
NH_4^+–N (%)	<0.01	0.30	0.28	0.30
NO_3^-–N (%)	0.03	<0.01	<0.01	0.10
C/N ratio	14.7	9.6	10.4	8.5
P (%)	1.58	1.12	1.07	2.07
K (%)	2.42	4.23	3.34	2.22
Cu (mg kg^{-1})	21	97	103	181
Zn (mg kg^{-1})	242	873	801	629
Cd (mg kg^{-1})	nm	<0.7	<0.7	0.8
Cr (mg kg^{-1})	nm	<10	13	81
Hg (mg kg^{-1})	nm	0.13	0.12	1.32
Ni (mg kg^{-1})	nm	25	44	38
Pb (mg kg^{-1})	nm	<20	<20	42

EC: electrical conductivity; MC: moisture content; nm: not measured; OM: organic matter; Org-N: organic nitrogen; W: windrow.

in compost from W1 was especially high (above 9.0), which could have important implications on the fertility and productivity of soils subjected to compost amendment as well as on the development of pH-sensitive plants.[43] High occurrence of nitrification (conversion of NH_4^+ into NO_3^-) after the thermophilic phase may help in reducing the pH (and alkalinity) of the compost since it is an acidifying process.[10,13,23] The measure of EC is meaningful because it reflects the salinity of the compost, i.e. overly salty compost is likely to be harmful to plants. In this regard, higher sensibility to EC exists when compost is used as a growing medium.[11] Owing to increase in the concentration of mineral matter throughout the process, the EC of the final compost rose up to 8.4–15.4 dS m^{-1} (values measured after 1:5 (w/w) water extraction). Those composts obtained exclusively using the CM presented higher values. Generally, the EC of animal manure composts are higher than those of other organic waste composts.[44] Blending of these composts with other non-saline materials may help in balancing the EC.

The OM content of composts was lower than that of the processed feedstocks due to the degradation of organic compounds and the consequent release of C as CO_2. Final C/N ratios in the compost were 14.7 for W1, 9.6 for W2, 10.4 for W3, and 8.5 for W4. The concentration of Org-N increased for composts from W1, W2, and W3 with respect to the corresponding raw feedstocks, but not for compost from W4 (prepared using DDSS). Initially, this last windrow presented the highest concentration of NH_4^+–N and the lowest C/N ratio, which resulted in significant loss of N, probably due to NH_3 volatilization.[45] Literature usually describes a negative correlation between the C/N ratio and N loss during composting,[24,26] with recommendable initial values of the C/N ratio above 20.[17] However, some works dealing with CM composting report lower initial values for that C/N ratio,[16,46] and that NH_3 volatilization is favored by other factors such as high concentrations of easily decomposable N and C compounds in the raw material, high number of turnings, good porosity, high temperature and pH, and warm environmental conditions.[47] Whatever be the reason, N loss by volatilization should be minimized in order to (i) retain N in compost to maximize its fertilizing value for crop production, and (ii) reduce their environmental impact, e.g. release of NH_3 (offensive odorant and acidifying agent). On the other hand, high loss of soluble forms by runoff was not expected, since composting was performed on covered surfaces that preserved the windrows from rain. Concentrations of NH_4^+–N declined throughout the processing and ranged from <0.01% (W1) to ~0.3% (W2, W3, and W4) on a dry weight basis. Thus, only in W1 the final NH_4^+–N content was below the maximum threshold of 0.04% recommended in finished composts.[48] In addition, the NH_4^+–N/NO_3^-–N ratio in this compost was as low as 0.20 (NO_3^-–N = 0.03%), practically equaling the threshold of 0.16 established by Bernal et al.[49] as an indicator of maturity

Presence of heavy metals in compost must be controlled to protect soil quality, and prevent contamination.[50] In this regard, the Spanish legislation has levied limitations to the heavy metal contents of fertilizing products made from waste and other organic components[51] (threshold concentrations of Cd, Cr, Cu, Hg, Ni, Pb, and Zn are 0.7, 70, 70, 0.4, 25, 45, and 200 mg kg^{-1} dry weight for the higher quality products (class A); 2, 250, 300, 1.5, 90, 150, and 500 mg kg^{-1} for the medium quality products (class B); and 3, 300, 400, 2.5, 100, 200, and 1,000 mg kg^{-1} for the lower quality products (class C) respectively), as well as the growing media[52] (same threshold concentrations for classes A and B, but not applicable for class C). In our study, compost from W4 (prepared using DDSS) presented the highest heavy metal content. Concentrations of Cd, Cr, Cu, Hg, Ni, and Zn referred above for class A products were measured in this compost, but were found to be below thresholds proposed for class C products. However, concentrations of Cu and Zn were also high when composting using CM alone. These relatively high concentrations in compost are largely derived from additives used as animal feeds that contain high levels of these metals since most of the dietary Cu and Zn are not assimilated by livestock but excreted in manure.[44]

Biological tests

Germination test. The best results of the germination test were obtained for the compost extract from W1, although

Table 6. Results of the germination test. Relative germination percentage for lettuce seeds after seven days of incubation. Values followed by the same letter are not significantly different ($\alpha = 0.05$).

Extract	*Germination (%)*
Control (water)	100 e
Compost from W1	89 d
Compost from W2	0 a
Compost from W3	19 b
Compost from W4	77 c

W: windrow.

germination was lower than for the water control (Table 6). Conversely, strong phytotoxicity was evidenced for the compost extract from W2 since no seed germination took place in this case. Phytotoxicity linked to the use of immature compost, or fresh manure, can be caused by several parameters, including salinity, NH_4^+, organic compounds, such as fatty acids and phenolic substances, and heavy metals.[12,53,54]

Growth test. According to the recommendations of the Federal Compost Quality Assurance Organization (FCQAO)[31], compost is considered to be tolerated by plants, and is suitable as soil improver and fertilizer if no visible chlorosis or necrosis appear on the leaves, and the vegetal yield when using 25% compost mixture reaches at least 90% of the yield obtained using the reference substrate alone. In this study, the yield achieved using mixture of compost from W1 (25% compost + 75% peat) was even higher than the yield achieved using reference substrate (100% peat; Table 7), and no visible damage was detected in the barley plants. These satisfactory results were not obtained for composts from W2, W3, and W4. On the other hand, and according to the aforementioned source,[31] compost can be used as a blending component for growing media if the vegetal yield when using 50% compost mixture reaches at least 90% of the yield obtained using the reference substrate alone. Again, results for compost from W1 were satisfactory (but not for the others), although there was a little delay in germination, which had no effects on the final growth.

Table 7. Results of the growth test. Relative vegetal yield of barley after 21 days in the 25–50% compost mixtures with respect to the reference substrate. Values in the same column followed by the same letter are not significantly different ($\alpha = 0.05$).

Substrate	*25% compost + 75% peat*	*50% compost + 50% peat*
Reference (100% peat)	100% b	100% b
Compost from W1	197% c	124% b
Compost from W2	56% a	12% a
Compost from W3	36% a	28% a
Compost from W4	30% a	33% a

W: windrow.

Conclusions

1. A full-scale composting process in turned windrows was monitored for 14 weeks. CM alone (two typologies of manure, i.e. with C/N ratios of ~25 (CM1, W1) and ~14 (CM2, W2)), or mixed with BA (CM2/BA blended at volumetric ratios of 1:1, W3) and DDSS/BA (CM2/DDSS/BA blended at volumetric ratios of 1:1:1, W4) was used in this experiment.
2. Temperature >55°C was reached in all the treatments (which has positive implications concerning sanitation) but following different time patterns. Under the applied conditions of turning (approximately once per week; except for W1 first three weeks, when turning was four days per week) and rewetting (40% < MC < 65%), the length of processing was not enough to obtain stable composts. Thus, only compost from W1 attained the maximum degree of stability. Use of BA (while maintaining turning frequency) reduced temperatures into the thermophilic range. A systematic program for the turning of windrows according to the temperatures achieved during processing, as well as the assurance of temperature drop to ambient levels at the end of the active decomposition period, would enhance control over the process.
3. The volume of windrows decreased sharply throughout the process, with the final volumes accounting for 40–54% of the initial values.
4. Chemical composition of final composts evidenced high fertilizing values in terms of N/P/K. However, only compost from W1 satisfied recommendations for the concentration of NH_4^+–N in mature composts (<0.04%), with NH_4^+–N/NO_3^-–N = 0.20. Addition of DDSS in W4 resulted in higher contents of metals in compost, although Cu and Zn were also high when composting using CM alone. High pH (in case of W1), EC, or heavy metal contents may limit the use of composts.
5. Maturation must be assured to reduce phytotoxicity issues. Biological tests (germination and growth) were conducted to evaluate the agronomic value of final composts. Positive results were obtained only for compost from W1, satisfying the required criteria to be used as soil improver, fertilizer, or in the preparation of growing media.
6. Use of BA is advised to be kept to minimum when composting using CM (although it may enhance convective aeration of windrows, or help in the conditioning of feedstocks with MC > 70%) to save running costs and space within the treatment facility. Addition of DDSS is not advisable (even if it might represent an economic income) because it favors the loss of N, and increases

heavy metal contents in the final compost. Nutrient retention during composting must be guaranteed by minimizing NH_3 emissions.

7. Overall, composting enhances the transportability of nutrients to long distances. This will reduce the risk of environmental affectations (soil, air, and water quality degradation) in areas with high farm densities such as Juncosa de les Garrigues while enhancing soil quality and crop productivity in other nutrient-deficient areas.

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