Pfenning's Organic Vegetables: Cultivating Circularity to Cut Organic Food Waste

Company Overview

Pfenning's Organic Vegetables is a 700-acre certified organic vegetable farm located in Ontario. As a grower, packer, importer, and distributor, Pfenning's is dedicated to sustainable agriculture practices that reduce food loss and waste while preserving organic integrity. The farm supplies a wide range of certified organic vegetables including carrots, leafy greens, and root crops to retailers and foodservice partners.

The Challenge

Before launching its food waste reduction initiative in 2023, Pfenning's faced significant challenges common to organic farming. The natural variability in crop quality due to seasonal growing conditions and pest pressure meant that a portion of produce did not meet retail cosmetic standards, leading to high levels of surplus and waste.

Although the farm has an extensive on-farm composting process in which food loss is transformed into a valuable soil amendment, it is challenging to efficiently divert the *avoidable* waste that could have still been consumed by people. These issues resulted in lost revenue and missed opportunities for community contribution.

The Solution

To tackle these challenges, Pfenning's implemented a circular food system approach that integrates several key strategies:

- **Surplus Donation:** Edible but cosmetically imperfect produce is regularly donated to Second Harvest, a Toronto-based food rescue organization, as well as other local but smaller organizations.
- **On-Farm Composting:** Inedible or unsellable organic waste is composted in a multi-step process on the farm and added to their fields to nurture the next crops. They have also expanded their composting offerings, and now compost for a distributor out of Toronto.
- **Measurement & Transparency:** The farm employs detailed tracking protocols to quantify volumes donated and composted, with efforts underway to measure associated greenhouse gas emissions reductions with help from Second Harvest's data team.
- **Education & Partnerships:** Pfenning engages consumers and supply chain partners through education initiatives to reduce food waste and improve produce handling for extended shelf life. They also partner with processors who can use the "cosmetically challenged" produce to diversify revenue opportunities.

🗺️ Where FLW Occurs

Farms, post-harvest handling, commercial composting services

⚙️ Main Drivers

Crop variability, food dating inconsistencies, limited composting infrastructure

🥕 Produce Types

Organic carrots, leafy greens, root vegetables, assorted organic produce

🔄 Primary Solutions

Food donation to Second Harvest; on-farm composting; measurement and education

🤝 Key Partners

Second Harvest, local organizations

📊 Data & Measurement

Donation and composting volumes tracked; greenhouse gas emission measurement in progress

🌍 Social & Environmental Impact

Over 1 million pounds donated; 350,000 pounds of Second Harvest's grade-out composted; landfill diversion; soil health improvements

💰 Financial Outcomes

Reduced disposal costs; composting services revenue; pursuing economic incentives

🏛️ Policy Context

Supporting food waste measurement standardization and composting infrastructure policies

🎯 Applicable UN SDGs

2 – Zero Hunger; 12 – Responsible Consumption and Production; 13 – Climate Action

Closing the Loop — Pfenning's Organic Vegetables & Second Harvest

Each year, thousands of pounds of organic vegetables grown by Pfenning's Organic Vegetables fall short of retail standards — not because they're unsafe or spoiled, but due to cosmetic imperfections. In many food systems, this would lead to significant waste.

At Pfenning's, surplus is viewed as opportunity. Not only does the farm redistribute food to Second Harvest, it also provides a service to Second Harvest by composting their grade-out that had been previously sent to landfill.

This compost is then spread on their fields as a soil amendment, fostering the circularity of their partnership. This collaboration transforms potential waste into nourishment and reinforces the farm's commitment to sustainability and community support.

"Our circular system ensures that nothing is wasted — surplus feeds families, and organic waste feeds the soil"

This approach was born from the recognition that traditional grading standards and fragmented supply chains left many growers with limited options for surplus produce. Pfenning's is invested in improved sorting procedures, and new, strong partnerships that keep more food in the system and out of landfills.

The partnership with Second Harvest relies on careful coordination and trust. Regular pickups ensure produce reaches food banks and meal programs promptly, supporting food security across the Toronto region.

As Jessica, Sustainability & Growth Specialist at Pfenning's, explains, "Our circular system ensures that nothing is wasted — surplus feeds families, and organic waste feeds the soil."

Beyond redistribution, the team at Pfenning's continuously refines sorting and handling protocols to maximize diversion. Transparency is key; the farm tracks waste streams meticulously and embraces honest reporting to fuel ongoing improvements.

Result: Lower disposal costs, new revenue streams, stronger communities and healthier soils

In order to scale impact beyond their farm, Pfenning's also advocates for policies that support food waste measurement standardization and expanded composting infrastructure. Financially, these practices lower disposal costs and create new revenue streams through composting services. The farm is actively exploring incentives and partnerships to strengthen the economic case for sustainable organic farming.

For Pfenning's Organic Vegetables, the biggest payoff is social and environmental: less food waste, stronger communities, and healthier soils that close the nutrient loop.

For more information visit: www.pfenningsfarms.ca