

Recycling Programs in Santa Cruz County

Synopsis

The many recycling programs within Santa Cruz County are managed by public, profit-making and non-profit organizations. Several of these were investigated by the Grand Jury to see if improvements could be made in areas of public awareness, efficiency and consolidation. A review of these programs indicated that through creative methods, landfills in the county were within state guidelines of 50 percent for solid waste reduction by 2000.

Background

In 1989, California state legislators recognized that landfill capacities were in a crisis. As a result, recycling of virtually all materials had become more critical to preserving the quality of the environment. The policy of “reduce, reuse, recycle,” environmentally sound land filling and transformation became the desired approach to solid waste management.¹

Recycling became a serious subject for California cities and counties as well as the public with the passage in 1989 of Assembly Bill 939. The passage of this bill established the following:

- The current organization, structure and mission of the California Integrated Waste Management Board (CIWMB).
- Mandates that all cities and counties reduce the amount of waste entering their landfills by 25 percent in 1995 and by 50 percent in 2000. This is referred to as the waste diversion rate.²
- An integrated framework for program implementation, solid waste planning and solid waste facility and landfill compliance.
- Encouragement of resource conservation.
- Consideration of the long-term effects of waste management operations.

Local governments, through CIWMB regulatory oversight, implement the diversion goals and program compliance. This is accomplished by monitoring landfill utilization through a disposal based reporting system.³

¹ CIWMB 21st Century Policy Project.

² California Assembly Bill 939.

³ CIWMB 21st Century Policy Project.

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Since the passage of AB 939 in 1989, California landfill capacity has increased. Although capacity is currently not considered the statewide crisis it once was, there are still problems regionally.

Recycling does not come without a price. The CIWMB 21st Century Policy Project was concerned that maintaining the year 2000 goals of AB 939 could be very difficult for some of the cities and counties within the state. However, as a result of the passage of AB 939 significant progress was achieved in:

- Waste diversion.
- Program implementation.
- Solid waste planning.
- Protection of public health and safety and the environment through the improved operation of landfills and solid waste facilities.

An important aspect in the surge of involvement with recycling continues to be public awareness. Each of the recycling facilities visited by the Grand Jury recognizes the need to publicize its activities. Many forms of literature are distributed throughout the county in both English and Spanish. The public awareness of recycling is an ongoing challenge considering the volume of advertising inundating our society. As with any message aimed at the public, success depends on its being remembered, which is a result of attention-getting creativity. Promotional information on recycling takes a variety of forms, such as:

- School programs.
- Bill inserts.
- Flyers.
- Pamphlets.
- Stickers.
- Television public service messages.
- Posters on collection trucks.

Separate messages target specific items such as household batteries, motor oil and computer printer cartridges. Public awareness is an investment in recycling efforts that can pay off with increased public participation.

Scope

This investigation examines the operations of the various organizations and agencies in the county involved in recycling. Outreach programs to increase public awareness are also looked at for each of the groups. The organizations include:

- County of Santa Cruz Department of Public Works.
- City of Santa Cruz Public Works Department.
- City of Watsonville Department of Public Works.
- Valley Women's Club (of San Lorenzo Valley).

- California Grey Bears, Inc.
- Waste Management, Inc. of Santa Cruz County.
- Ecology Action, Inc.

Sources

Interviewed:

Santa Cruz County Officials.
Santa Cruz City Officials.
Watsonville City Officials.
Santa Cruz County recycling organizations.
Santa Cruz County landfill organizations.

Reviewed:

Nevada County Grand Jury 2002-2003 Report
California Integrated Waste Management Board 21st Century Policy Project,
www.ciwmb.ca.gov/2000Plus/Events/FutureMar99/issues1.htm.
Recycling Today, Enforcement of Commercial Recycling, www.recyclingtoday.com
Darryl Young, Director of the California Department of Conservation,
KGO radio interview May 27, 2004.
Richard Anthony, California Resource Recovery Association Board member, cited in
Mandatory Summary, www.greenyesgrn.org/1997/0206.html.

Findings

Information in findings 1 - 26 is taken from interviews with various local recycling and landfill organizations.

1. County landfills are reaching maximum capacity, requiring that new sites be identified, licensed and built.
2. It takes approximately ten years to get a permit for a new landfill.
3. The average lifespan of California landfills is about 15 years.
4. The remaining lifespan for the City of Santa Cruz's landfill (Dimeo Lane) is about 34 years, if carefully used.
5. The remaining lifespan of the Santa Cruz County landfill (Buena Vista) is about 15 years.
6. Santa Cruz County Code 7.20.110 states that garbage can be held no longer than seven days.

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7. The county contracts with a private company for its garbage and recycling pickup.
8. The cities of Santa Cruz and Watsonville provide their own garbage and recycling trucks and pickup.
9. Currently the county has no mandatory garbage or recycling service in the unincorporated areas. Garbage pickup is mandatory in all four of the county's incorporated areas. Separate garbage and recycling containers are distributed in the cities of Capitola, Santa Cruz, Scotts Valley and Watsonville. Using the recycling containers is optional.
10. Approximately 65 percent of residents in the unincorporated areas of the county use garbage and recycling curbside pickup.
11. Approximately 55 percent of San Lorenzo Valley residents use curbside pickup.
12. Mandatory garbage and recycling pickup in the unincorporated area of the county could result in less illegal dumping and a reduced amount of recyclable materials in the landfill, some officials said.
13. If all recyclable materials were recycled, officials say that the Buena Vista landfill could have at least a 30 percent additional reduction in material.
14. Some recycling officials said that Buena Vista landfill workers need a better understanding of California's recycling laws (AB 939 and the appropriate California Public Resources Code sections) in order to inform customers who arrive at the landfill with recyclable materials.
15. Some people think recycling is free but because of the expenses involved it is not. Volume is the key to making a profit in recycling: the greater the volume, the greater the profit.
16. The City of Santa Cruz routinely uses the same customers for its sale of recyclable materials. The City of Watsonville aggressively negotiates with brokers using high dollar items (white paper and cardboard) to obtain the best price.
17. Each recycling entity that collects materials usually makes its own arrangements to sell its products to companies outside of the county.
18. The County of Santa Cruz's Ben Lomond Transfer Station has a limited area to collect recycling materials.
19. Interactions among various coordinators of the various recycling organizations within the county are informal.

20. Some recycling officials are concerned about the idea of consolidation recycling activities that involve information and public awareness. They feel the money might not be wisely spent.
21. The City of Santa Cruz has won awards for its public recycling information.
22. The county's informational materials on recycling were criticized as poor and unimaginative.
23. Some recycling groups in the county believe they do not get adequate exposure to inform the public of proper recycling procedures and the availability of local resources.
24. Ecology Action is a Santa Cruz based non-profit informational organization that uses grants from federal, state and county governments to promote recycling. Ecology Action works with the county on some recycling projects.
25. Some cities and counties get state and federal grants to run special recycling programs. Examples are programs to recycle motor oil and batteries.
26. As of 2003, 22 of the 58 counties in California have met the 50 percent solid waste diversion requirement specified by AB 939.^{4[4]} In 2001, Santa Cruz County had a 53 percent diversion rate.
27. Each day 2.5 million glass bottles are discarded in landfills in California. Commercial customers, such as restaurants and apartment complexes, are large users and therefore large contributors to the problem in California.
28. Several communities across the U.S. have adopted programs of mandatory recycling with excellent results. (This does not include mandatory garbage pick-up). An example is San Diego where mandatory separation saw participation jump from 30-40% up to 80-90%. They used a coordinated approach of public awareness, slogans, media press releases, press conferences and special events to enlist public understanding of the advantages of recycling.
29. The key element of mandatory recycling is to make participation "convenient."
30. Other communities have seen increased cooperation by use of economic incentives along with comprehensive education and promotion activities. Although the word "mandatory" initially raises concerns, communities have found little need for it. With convenient home and commercial pick up service, plus vigorous inspection at the landfill entrance for drive up loads, people are more inclined to recycle willingly.
31. Enforcement programs vary tremendously throughout North America.

^{4[4]} Nevada County Grand Jury Report 2002-03.

Conclusions

1. At the present rate of intake, the county will need to close the Buena Vista landfill in 15 years and move to a new location.
2. Reducing the amount of recyclable materials that go into the county landfill could lengthen the site's life by five years.
3. The increased amount of solid waste generated by requiring mandatory garbage and recycling pickup could fill the county's landfill sooner than its currently projected lifetime. The increased amount of recycling might not be enough to offset the extra volume.
4. The quality of public information on recycling varies, depending on which agency produces it.
5. Some buyers pay more than others for specific recycled materials.
6. Consolidating the contracts to sell specific materials from the various county recycling entities offers the potential for higher prices for the different categories of materials.
7. Santa Cruz County exceeded the state mandate for the 50 percent solid waste diversion requirement in 2001.
8. While recycling efforts throughout Santa Cruz County have enabled the landfills to surpass the minimum goals, there is still more to do. The ideal goal would be to capture 100% of the recyclable materials being generated in the county. Practicality dictates that such a goal is not entirely realistic. However Santa Cruz County can do better.
9. "Educate, encourage, enforce" is an approach that has proven to help increase recycling efforts.

Recommendations

1. The County of Santa Cruz should examine its operation of the Buena Vista landfill. Close monitoring and enforcement of recycling practices could reduce the amount of recyclables entering the landfill. This could include positive incentives for proper disposal and citations for improper disposal of recyclables.
2. The county, the cities of Santa Cruz and Watsonville and other local agencies involved in recycling should be more cooperative among themselves. For maximum public exposure and fiscal efficiency, they should coordinate printed recycling information and media coverage.

3. Local recycling entities should take a regional approach to obtain countywide contracts in order to combine and sell together each category of recycled materials to the highest bidder. They should total the volume at the various locations, rather than collect the material at a central station.
4. Local recycling agencies should consider the experience of other communities and decide whether mandatory recycling would be beneficial.
5. Cardboard and office paper are the focus when landfills ban commercial waste. These are high dollar items for re-sale. To enforce these bans, landfill operators should:
 - Refuse loads of cardboard and office paper.
 - Impose fines on haulers of cardboard and office paper.
 - Track down offending customers and fine them.
 - Place a significant amount of responsibility on haulers to force customers to comply.
6. The City of Santa Cruz Public Works Department and in particular the Waste Reduction Coordinator should be commended for its excellent work in public awareness through its publications and media coverage. It should be commended for winning the 2004 Award of Excellence in Writing for the statewide competition conducted by the California Public Information Officials (CAPIO).
7. The Valley Women's Club should be commended for using recycling revenues to finance its charitable services to the community.
8. The California Grey Bears should be commended for its service to the seniors of Santa Cruz County and for using recycling as one means to raise money.
9. The County of Santa Cruz should be commended for exceeding the state mandate of 50 percent solid waste diversion in 2001.

Responses Required

Entity	Findings	Recommendations	Respond Within
Santa Cruz City Council	1- 4, 6, 8, 9, 15 - 17, 19 - 21, 23, 25, 27 - 31	2 - 6	90 days (September 30, 2004)
Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors	1- 3, 5 - 7, 9 - 15, 17 - 20, 22 - 31	1 - 5, 7 - 9	90 days (September 30, 2004)
Watsonville City Council	1 - 3, 6, 8, 9, 15 - 17, 19, 20, 23, 25, 27 - 31	2 - 5	90 days (September 30, 2004)