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NEWS

Peña's gears up for organic waste rules

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When Salvador Peña started Peña's Disposal Service back in 1949, he began with the purpose of organically recycling waste to feed his pigs.

Over 65 years later, Peña's Disposal Service and Dinuba's local businesses are focusing in on organic recycling once again to gear up for a new state mandate, which aims to reduce organic waste by 50 percent statewide.

Governor Jerry Brown's AB 1826 state mandate targets greenhouse gas emissions with the goal of a 50 percent organic waste reduction by 2020 based on 2014 disposal levels.

Items that fall within the organic waste category include food waste, food-soiled paper waste, green waste, landscape and pruning waste and nonhazardous wood waste. Food-soiled paper waste includes items such as, but not limited to, fast food wrappers, napkins and tissues, paper cups and plates and pizza boxes.

"For places that package food waste such as grocery stores, when they have to throw out produce, they're going to have to separate it from the plastic," Sherry Peña, business relations and development manager for Peña's Disposal Service said.

"So it's really only going to be a different way to think about it as well as the processes for it."

By Jan. 1 of 2016, local jurisdictions must have a plan to implement the state mandate. By April 1, 2016, businesses that produce eight or more cubic yards of organic waste will be required to recycle organic waste. By the start of 2017, businesses that produce four or more cubic yards of organic waste will be required as well. A dumpster of four cubic yards is considered to be medium-sized for businesses.

Green waste recycling will also be mandatory for multifamily dwellings with five or more units.

Art Peña, vice president of Peña's, suggested to the city council earlier this month that the city implement organic recycling for all businesses at one time instead of the state-mandated phase approach. The mandate does require the city to create a city policy or ordinance on organic recycling and to enforce it as well.

The short-term plan to deal with the waste for Peña's Disposal Service is to transport it to composters.

One of the biggest nearby composters is a recycling facility in Tulare operated by Harvest Power. They accept food waste and green waste and turn it into compost, then making it available for sale.

This process turns the waste into a reusable product, rather than the pollution it currently causes.

"Putting it in the trash has a lot of environmental impacts," said Nick Lapis, legislative coordinator for Californians Against Waste. "When you put it in the trash it makes methane. The methane that gets expelled from the landfills is very, very potent greenhouse gas."

Lapis said food waste is the source for most of the pollution, odors and water and air quality issues caused by landfills.

The compost that is created is especially useful to farmers, Lapis explained.

"If you make compost out of it, it is very valuable," Lapis said. "Farmers love it because it increases the water holding capacity of their soil by 20 to 30 percent. The nutrients in the compost are more soluble. The healthier root systems pull more carbon from the air."

California is expected to benefit both environmentally and economically from these changes. Lapis said the changes could potentially lead to a six million ton reduction in greenhouse gasses, as well as an estimated 14,000 new jobs across the state.

Linda Novick, regulatory compliance manager for Harvest Power, said that the Tulare County facility was upgraded last year. They anticipate receiving more waste soon due to the mandate, but now have the capacity to handle more. Just how much they receive is yet to be seen.

Peña's Disposal Service is currently in the process of finding out just what kind of organic footprint is currently being created in the area. A checklist will be sent out to Dinuba businesses next month to get a better idea of what businesses are currently doing with their waste. Peña's will assess the results with a plan in place by January 2016 and have it implemented by April.

The city will also have to implement this mandate, meaning organic waste bins will be coming to schools as well as city-hosted events. The process of getting the message across and properly implemented is expected to be tedious, and costly for some.

"We want to implement programs at the schools that maybe include waste monitors, similar to hall monitors," Peña said. "Make it more of a pride thing to help other students understand what is organic versus what is true waste."

This also means new, separate cans for businesses, along with new trucks, routes and possibly new employees for Peña's Disposal Service.

While the short-term plan is to transport the waste to composting facilities, the long-term plan for the Cutler-based business is to expand its facilities. Peña's recently completed a full permit expansion of its facilities.

The company is seeking to extend its franchising agreement with the city to help secure stability throughout the transition. They are currently on contract with the city of Dinuba until 2025.

The disposal service recently reached an extension “well beyond” 2025 with the unincorporated Tulare County.

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