

NEWS

County seeks ways to convert waste to energy

by India Allen
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Santa Barbara County could soon be giving new meaning to "Living Green" with its latest efforts to find new ways of converting solid waste into sustainable energy.

In a unanimous vote Jan. 22, the Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors approved the goals of a conversion technology project and directed county staff to begin screening potential companies that could offer conversion technology services. Conversion technologies refer to a diverse set of new non-combustion thermochemical and biochemical technologies capable of converting biomass and plastic wastes into marketable products.

"I'm eager about this," said 1st District Supervisor Salud Carbajal, who has been collaborating with 3rd District Supervisor Brooks Firestone to explore conversion technologies. "We really can't waste any more time. The clock is ticking, and every day that goes by that we don't do anything, the Tajiguas Landfill continues to fill. It's imperative that we take leadership and move forward."

If implemented, conversion technologies could be used to turn what many of us consider trash into energy and fuel, an alternative to the ever-decreasing capacity of the Tajiguas Landfill. Waste from the valley and South County is discarded at Tajiguas and the remainder of waste, mostly from North County, including Orcutt, Santa Maria and Guadalupe, goes to the Santa Maria Landfill.

The decision followed a four-month process in which the county hired Alternative Resources Inc., an engineering, environmental, economic and financial planning company, to consult about the feasibility of implementing conversion technology at the Tajiguas Landfill. The board also directed the consulting company to develop project goals.

After hearing a 20-minute presentation from the waste management department, the board endorsed the project with the conditions that conversion technology would have to intend to increase the recycling of already sorted material; limit environmental impacts that might be associated with conversion technologies; be financially practicable for rate payers; produce green energy, fuel production and other marketable products; and provide a humane work environment.

"This would be preparing for the future," said Mark Schleich, deputy director of the public works department. "We have talked to a lot of the people who build

these facilities, which are international, and the board approved the goals for the project as well as the minimum criteria a given company that might be interested must meet."

ARI will seek additional information from existing conversion technology vendors and complete a study that will highlight available vendors and technologies that could meet the county's need. The company then will come back to the board with its findings in April.

"We are trying to find out how much this would cost and if it's in the realm of a couple double lattes a month, or if it's less than that and if it's a reasonable price," Schleich said.

Though the Goleta-based Tajiguas Landfill is the only site currently being considered for conversion technology, the representatives from the Santa Maria Landfill are watching closely and will consider instituting conversion technology if the project proves successful at Tajiguas.

"Right now we are part of the jurisdiction that's working with the county; we give our support," said Jeff Clarin, manager of Solid Waste for the City of Santa Maria. "If conversion technology works ... it would change the way solid waste is handled. Typically, they bury it, and with conversion technology we could reduce landfill waste and convert it to energy."

The Santa Maria Landfill is in the process of acquiring and transitioning into a second landfill site. "We have a site located, 10 miles south of the existing landfill, and we are looking to permit a new landfill," Clarin said. "At the same time, if the conversion technology goes well, we would like to implement conversion technology in the new landfill, but we're handling it as we're just going to get a new landfill right now."

The county also is informing the public about the prospects of conversion technology. The county has formed a multi-jurisdictional solid waste task force that consists of a representative from every city and two county supervisors. The task force has been involved in visiting various city council meetings and holding short, informative presentations about conversion technology.

"I thought the presentation was very informative," said Buellton City Manager Steve Thompson after hearing it at the Jan. 10 City Council meeting. "I'm hopeful that a method is going to be found to address our future solid waste problems so that, eventually — not in my lifetime, but eventually — we will do away with landfills and have other methods of disposing of solid waste."