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L.A. County and SCS Engineers use Outreach and Awards to Reach Commercial Waste Generators

L.A. County has a mission is to save landfill space, meet county waste diversion goals and comply with state recycling and organics management mandates.

Los Angeles County's Department of Public Works is on a mission. It's targeting the more than 1,300 businesses identified as large commercial waste generators in the county's unincorporated communities. And its goal is to save precious landfill space, meet county waste diversion goals and comply with state recycling and organics management mandates as part of its Smart Business Recycling Program.

Those unincorporated communities of L.A. County generate approximately 2.8 million tons of waste per year. Nearly 70 percent of that waste is diverted through a number of existing waste reduction, reuse and recycling programs, but the county says despite exceeding the mandated diversion rate, landfill space in the county is still declining and there is a real need for landfill alternatives.

To combat this trend, the county has contracted with California-based SCS Engineers, an environmental consulting and contracting firm, to reach out to these businesses and determine their needs for implementing recycling and organics programs or expanding those programs already in place. The county's Smart Business Recycling Program involves visits from both the county and SCS to help determine the wants of each business.

"SCS is our boots on the ground," Christopher Sheppard, civil engineer for Los Angeles County Department of Public Works, says.

The county has also set some aggressive diversion goals that need to be met.

"We like to set good goals not only that are achievable but that are challenging as well," Sheppard says.

It was in 2014, that the L.A. County Board of Supervisors adopted its Roadmap

to a Sustainable Waste Management Future, which established disposal reduction targets of 80 percent diversion from landfills by 2025, 90 percent diversion by 2035 and 95-plus percent diversion from landfills by 2045. In addition to the county's Roadmap goals, the State of California also has legislative drivers, he says.

The state passed a mandatory commercial recycling law (Assembly Bill 341) in 2012, and a mandatory commercial organics management law (Assembly Bill 1826) in 2014. AB 341 requires all commercial entities to have basic recycling, including plastic, paper, bottles and cans. AB 1826 requires businesses to recycle organic waste.

In identifying the first round of large commercial generators, SCS and the county surveyed those businesses to determine their waste generation and their recycling efforts.

“One of the primary objectives of the program is to inform business owners of the law because, unfortunately, not all businesses are aware that there is a state mandate for commercial recycling and for the commercial organics law,” says SCS Engineers Vice President and Director of Sustainable Materials Management, Michelle Leonard, who is the SCS project manager working with L.A. County.

As the organics law is being phased in, it's capturing just the largest generators initially, but eventually will cover most businesses, she says.

“This program directly supports the county's Roadmap to a Sustainable Waste Management Future by helping businesses to implement recycling programs,” says Leonard. “And not only recycling but waste reduction, as well, all of which, of course, contribute to reducing greenhouse gas emissions, resource management and sustainable materials management.”

From those 1,300 businesses, the county and SCS identified about 400 that qualify as the largest generators under A.B. 1826. Sheppard says the county is doing follow-up visits and surveys to determine the type of business, current recycling practices, types of waste generated and to make some recommendations for what companies might do to implement or expand recycling programs.

“So far we’ve been getting a really positive response. Of the 400 or so businesses that we’ve identified as large generators, more than 200 of them have requested follow-up visits, which indicates a real interest in pursuing recycling programs,” he says.

The follow-up visits involve recommendations on how to reduce waste, both on a front end from source reduction and purchasing side. On the back end, if they have certain materials previously being thrown away, the recommendation might include places where those materials could be recycled or a secondary market. With a secondary market, instead of being a cost to dispose of, those materials could be a potential revenue stream, adds Leonard.

Eventually the program will look at three areas, including county unincorporated areas, county operations and county-wide regional goals, and include businesses, large venues, schools and multi-family residences. Currently, the focus is on the county unincorporated area.

“We are focusing a lot of outreach and education efforts on our businesses and multi-family residences,” says Sheppard.

It’s can be difficult to identify what businesses are out there and who the large waste generators are, he says. SCS is assisting the county with this task, and at multi-family dwellings, is helping track down property owners or managers who can implement recycling programs.

Whatever the business, the visit is important.

“We’ll go out there with the consultant,” says Sheppard. “We’ll talk to the business owner. We’ll learn more about their business needs and about how we can help them to set up additional recycling programs.”

They might introduce businesses to the county website , too, which is another tool for businesses to use for green purchasing guidelines, recycling finder, hauler locators and more information for implementing or expanding programs.

“We are finding that most businesses are very interested in recycling and want to do the right thing but may not have the tools to do it, and that is why the technical assistance is so important,” says Leonard.

SCS has done these types of programs over the years, she says, and has learned that it takes a champion—someone at the company to lead the way. It also takes a green team—particularly at larger businesses where they get everyone involved, including the purchasing department, maintenance and the operations department.

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