

Biomass company building first power plant near Castle

By Brandon Bower

Merced Sun-Star and Sacramento Bee, Tuesday, February 15, 2011

The people behind a small-scale biomass plant that turns old shipping pallets into electricity hope it's the start of something big for the energy industry.

San Francisco-based Phoenix Biomass Energy Inc. recently finished a 500-kilowatt biomass plant at Golden State Pallet & Crate near the former Castle Air Force Base.

Phoenix Biomass Chief Executive Officer Greg Stangl said he hopes the plant, which can convert agricultural waste and other organic materials into electricity, will become a showcase for the potential of renewable energy as his company replicates the model throughout the Central Valley.

The valley, with its focus on agriculture and industry, "gets" biomass, he said.

"People here understand biomass. This is a technology from the late 1800s, so people here know about it," Stangl said.

"The other sort of renewable stuff, like solar power and wind turbines, are sexier and favored in the Bay Area."

Phoenix Biomass has built several of the small-scale plants in Europe, but the Merced County plant is the first of its type to receive a permit in the United States, Stangl said.

"It took about three years longer to get a permit than it did overseas," he said, adding that the company is working on a larger 1-megawatt plant at an agricultural byproducts company in Oakdale.

"The great news is that the second one went so much faster it'll make your head spin. Once we went through the process and educated the guys on site, the second trip through was considerably easier."

The mostly automated plant helped create seven jobs, Stangl said.

Mark Hendrickson, Merced County's director of commerce, aviation and economic development, said the type of jobs created by the plant are the kind of careers that the county wants to attract.

"We believe that Merced County is a premiere location to attract green commerce, whether it's solar or converting wood waste into power," Hendrickson said.

"We believe that Merced County is uniquely positioned and this is a company, that, we learned very quickly, has a big set of plans."

Hendrickson said the county helped the company cut through some of the red tape involved in the permit process by talking with a number of regulatory agencies, such as the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District.

Stangl said he was proud that the financing did not require government assistance.

Phoenix tries to build its plants where there's an abundance of bio-mass, such as agriculture waste. The most interest, he said, comes from large agricultural processors such as almond hullers, orchard removal companies and waste sites.

If there's excess energy being produced, it can be sold to large utilities, Stangl said.

He said UC Merced's research into renewable energy wasn't a factor in choosing Merced as its starting point, but he was excited about the possibility of collaboration.

"The university has people working on gasification and they have a lab-scale gasifier, but it's a happy coincidence that there are people in our home base from the science fields," he said.

"We are not a research and development company, but we are very excited about the opportunity to cooperate with them."

EPA to look at pesticides in Kettleman homes

By Eiji Yamashita

Hanford Sentinel, Monday, Feb. 14, 2011

A federal agency plans to study indoor pesticide presence in Kettleman City homes this spring to find out whether residents face toxic exposure to chemicals drifting from surrounding orchards and farms.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency announced its plans during a community meeting this past Monday.

Officials say they noticed new orchards had been planted around the residential area with no buffer during a recent visit to the impoverished farmworker town with birth-defect problems.

The agency said it wants to be proactive and intends to use the information to guide future actions to protect these homes from agricultural pesticides, rather than trying to find a link between pesticide exposure and birth defects.

"One of the things that we discussed internal to the agency was what other contamination residents in that area may be subjected to," said Pam Cooper, manager of the Pesticide Office of the EPA regional office in San Francisco. "Because it's a high agricultural area with a high volume of pesticide use, we thought it would be a good idea to see whether agricultural pesticides are showing up in homes, where they really shouldn't be showing up."

The federal agency's proposed indoor pesticide sampling comes only two months after the state completed its investigation into the birth-defect situation and other health concerns in the community, which is 3.5 miles from the Waste Management site that is the largest toxic waste facility in the West.

Although the state investigation focused on diesel emissions and pollution from the nearby waste facility, it also looked into pesticides in the air and detected chlorpyrifos, endosulfan and diazinon. Acute exposure to these pesticides causes dizziness and other effects to the central nervous system.

Kings County Health Director Keith Winkler said he didn't think a new study is necessary.

"I think what the state did last year was the most extensive environmental health investigation in California," Winkler said. "There is nothing that indicated that there were pesticide exposure problems that warranted further investigation, so it seems somewhat unnecessary to me."

But Cooper said the federal agency is not replicating work already done by the state.

Cooper also said the aim of the study is not to find any links between birth defects and pesticide exposure, either.

Although it would be the first time such a study is being conducted in Kings County by a federal agency, a similar study has been done before by the state in McFarland, Parlier and Lompoc, Cooper said.

Meanwhile, the agency is looking for residents who are willing to volunteer for the study. Cooper said the agency hopes to recruit up to 30 residents.

Norman Calero, pesticide specialist with the EPA, said the agency plans to conduct the first round of sampling in March and spend the next four months analyzing the results. Another round of sampling will be conducted in July and August, and analysis will take another four months, Calero said.

Businesses may have to recycle under rules targeting emissions

By Alex Breitler, Record Staff Writer

The Stockton Record, February 13, 2011

STOCKTON - Businesses and apartment complexes would be forced to recycle under new rules being developed at both the state and local levels.

The push is coming from the California Air Resources Board, which is considering mandatory commercial recycling to help meet the state's ambitious greenhouse gas reduction goals.

More recycling means fewer emissions from resource extraction and production and less potent methane gas seeping from landfills.

The question is how business owners - many of whom are already voluntarily recycling - will respond to yet another rule.

"Anytime we get the word 'mandatory,' as small-business owners, the hair on the back of our heads stands up," said Blain Bibb, chairman of the Greater Stockton Chamber of Commerce's Green Team San Joaquin, a coalition seeking balance between environmental stewardship and a healthy bottom line.

The commercial sector generates more than half of the solid waste in California, the state says. And much of that waste is recyclable even though it ends up in a landfill.

The draft state regulation puts the onus on local agencies to come up with their own commercial recycling programs. Stockton is in the process of doing just that, by revising the city's existing recycling ordinance.

Details of its plan remain vague, but meetings with waste haulers and workshops with businesses are planned for the coming weeks and months, with City Council action coming as soon as May.

The city's pitch to businesses - made at a Green Team meeting last week - is that recycling may save them money on trash hauling by allowing them to downsize their garbage bins. Stockton's waste collectors don't charge for commercial recycling up to 4 cubic yards.

"It's a no-brainer if you can see the benefits and cost savings," said Mike Miller, Stockton's solid waste manager. "Regardless of the environmental benefits, no one is going to dismiss possible savings in their trash bill."

Commercial recycling here, as in many locations, has lagged behind residential recycling with the latter's easy three-bin curbside pickup.

Stockton's total rate of diversion from landfills is better than 60 percent. The diversion rate for commercial waste alone is about 35 percent, said Maricela Calvo, the project manager for the city.

Exactly what will constitute a "business" under the ordinance is still under review, she said. She did say the ordinance would apply to multifamily housing complexes of four units or larger, which is stricter than what the state has proposed.

Technically, the city's existing ordinance already requires separation of recyclable materials and green waste, but it doesn't explicitly call out the commercial sector. It's too soon to say how the rewritten ordinance would be enforced, Calvo said, or what its impact might be on jobs.

A draft contractor's report found that mandatory commercial recycling across California could generate the equivalent of 938 to 1,396 new jobs. However, the cost from the program's start in 2012 through 2020 could range from \$454 million to more than \$1 billion, a roughly 2 to 5 percent increase over what is already being spent.

At last week's meeting, business officials offered several suggestions to the city, including making sure that diverted materials are kept within the community and that there are incentives for businesses to participate.

"The key here is collaboration," Bibb said. "You talk about the stick, but as small business owners, we love the carrot."

New website tracks the health of Kern County

By Steven Mayer, Californian staff writer
Bakersfield Californian, Tuesday, Feb. 15, 2011

Kern County's problems are no secret. Public health officials and local news organizations have focused on them for years:

There's obesity and all its related risks; some of the highest teen birth rates in the state; [unhealthy air quality](#); grinding poverty; unequal access to health care -- and the list goes on.

So local health care officials may not be surprised if the reaction is one of skepticism rather than jubilation Tuesday when they unveil a new public database for tracking the health needs of the community.

A year in the making, the 2010 Community Needs Assessment is a collaborative effort by Bakersfield Memorial Hospital, Delano Regional Medical Center, Kaiser Permanente, the Kern County Department of Public Health, Mercy Hospitals of Bakersfield, San Joaquin Community Hospital and other local partners.

Despite the heavyweight players involved, the partners in the assessment, including his own agency, will have to show that it's not just another plan, said Kern County Public Health Director Matt Constantine.

"Why should we care? It's a good question," Constantine said.

"For one thing, you have these six organizations ... coming together to set priorities," Constantine said. "That hasn't happened before."

The Web-based data collected at the website is impressive -- and voluminous. If you want to see current information on obesity in Kern County, for example, you will find charts and graphs based on age, gender or race.

If you're so inclined, you can read about why just 66.8 percent of Kern's teens engage in regular physical activity -- or that obesity costs women more in earnings than men.

The database will be updated on a continuous basis, organizers promise, allowing community groups to gauge the progress of their efforts through the website's tracking system, said Kristin Weirather, senior community benefit specialist at Kaiser Permanente.

"This is a big deal for the community," Weirather said Monday.

It brings together often-competing hospitals in the service of a common goal, she said.

But will assessment and planning result in action and results?

Yes, Weirather said. The comprehensive assessment will help Kaiser Permanente and others steer community grants toward efforts on the ground that show they are making a difference.

In addition, she said, Kaiser will target the focus of its "intellectual assets" -- a wealth of medical professionals and experts -- to share their knowledge and experience where they are most needed.

Through the year-long process, organizers found that the county needs to make improvement in the areas of obesity, basic needs, poverty and unemployment, education, sexually transmitted infections, access to healthcare, teen birth rate and infant health, diabetes, mortality rates, [air quality](#) and public safety.

There are no real surprises in that list, Constantine acknowledged. Most of it is common knowledge. What has to happen in 2011 and beyond, he said, is a coordinated effort to generate measurable improvements in Kern's long list of problems and dysfunctions.

"The community assessment is worthless," he said, "if it's not followed by action and results."

To learn more about the 2010 Community Needs Assessment, go to Healthykern.org and click on "Community Health Needs Assessment."

