

Crumbs to Power

Stimulus money to power anaerobic digesters at Monterey Regional Waste Management

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By Sara Rubin

Leftovers are slated to become ingredients in a \$1.6 million anaerobic digestion pilot planned to begin at Monterey Regional Waste Management District in Marina this summer.

After the digesters capture methane, a greenhouse gas, the partially decomposed material goes into traditional compost piles, where it should stink less and attract fewer nuisance gulls.

“We believe this is the future of organics management, especially hard-to-handle organics like food waste,” says Jeff Lindenthal, the district’s public education and recycling manager.

Of 20,000 tons of green waste the district receives a year, about 15 percent is food scraps. “We’re approaching it like a chef might approach a menu,” Lindenthal says. “We have these different organic ingredients. We could even try wet cardboard.”

The district already generates 5 megawatts of methane power from its landfill, where organic matter takes up to 20 years to break down. Using technology from San Jose-based Zero Waste, that process will be slashed to three weeks.

The district sells most of that power to Pacific Gas & Electric for just shy of 8 cents a kilowatt-hour; half that contract expires on Dec. 31. Zero Waste is asking for 12 cents per kilowatt-hour, plus a cut of the \$38 tipping fee haulers pay the district to accept a load.

“Even though it’s not revenue-positive during this pilot period, we’re getting technology, equipment and maintenance,” says district board chair Leo Laska.

The board on Dec. 16 gave Zero Waste the nod for the five-year pilot, enabling the company to qualify for \$500,000 in federal stimulus funds that expire Dec. 31. They’ll consider final contract terms Jan. 20.