

Junk to Juice

Salinas Valley looks to replace its landfill with America's first garbage-to-fuel plant.

Monterey County Weekly

September 30, 2010

By Robin Urevich



Salinas Valley Solid Waste Authority's recycling is viewed through the discarded tooth of a tub grinder, which cuts waste materials into mulch, according to SVSWA's Jose Gamboa.

Gonzales, population 8,725, could one day be home to a first-in-the-nation ultra-high-tech plant that would zap garbage into fuel, rendering the Johnson Canyon dump largely irrelevant. "A landfill is a big hole in the ground," says Salinas Valley Solid Waste Authority General Manager Patrick Mathews. "It's a long-term liability for the community."

Landfills, he adds, are a dying technology. "Why would we want to create more liabilities when we can make that [trash] back into a fuel product that would displace oil and petroleum?"

For five years, SVSWA board members have racked up big bills, journeying to Japan, Spain, Norway and Canada for in-person glimpses at alternative ways of handling trash that haven't been tried in the United States.

Now, two companies – Plasco Energy Group of Canada and Spain's Urbaser – are in the running for contracts with SVSWA. The authority could opt to go with a single contractor, or contract with both to mix-and-match technologies, Mathews says.

Plasco would zap non-recyclables with intense heat – like a lightning bolt – Mathews says, reducing them to basic elements to create synthetic gas. The company's so-called plasma technology has been 25 years in the making but is relatively untried. A Plasco demonstration facility now operates in Ottawa, and a second Canada plant is scheduled to go online.

Its rival, Urbaser, boasts 60 facilities in Europe, which it says are customized to fit community needs. "Technologies include conversion of waste to fuel, using microorganisms to break down organic matter and the careful culling of recyclables, the combination of which would divert all but 2 percent of Salinas Valley's waste from the dump," according to Urbaser Vice President Javier Dominguez. "What we can offer are actual projects that are not in the demonstration phase," Dominguez adds.

Urbaser's method "will never be as good as ours," counters Plasco Vice President Alisdair McLean. "It's like... a tape recorder when you could have an iPod."

At the Monterey Regional Waste Management District, General Manager William Merry notes his agency isn't diving into high-tech approaches any time soon. "I think we'd prefer to watch and see these technologies land on the ground," Merry says, adding that MRWMD already diverts half its trash from the dump by reusing or recycling.

SVSWA's Mathews says it's too soon to talk about costs, since the authority is still negotiating with the companies. But McLean says the Plasco facility would be in the \$100 million range. The company would

recoup its expenses not by passing them on to customers, he says, but by selling the fuel it produces to the energy grid.

Urbaser's Dominguez says it's too early to discuss how much his company would spend on its facilities. "I don't have much confidence in either one," says former Gonzales Mayor George Worthy, who once served on the SVSWA board. Still, he says, the valley can't keep burying its waste.

"We're keeping tabs on the proposals," says Gonzales City Manager Rene Mendez. "Both generate jobs. Both bring economic value to the valley. But that needs to be compared with the cost of the technology, which is likely to raise rates for customers."

The project, which is expected to be completed in three to four years, faces a full environmental review.