

# SANTA CRUZ COUNTY: ZERO WASTE FOR A MORE SUSTAINABLE WORLD

## OVERVIEW

The Santa Cruz County Zero Waste Program is an acknowledged leader in California, frequently introducing cutting-edge waste solutions that are widely emulated elsewhere.

## CHALLENGE

The world of Recycling and Solid Waste is in turmoil. China's Green Fence and National Sword initiatives have shut down some of the largest markets for recyclable materials. Many programs have stopped accepting plastic or paper, and some have stopped recycling altogether. Recycling centers are closing across the state. Resource recovery programs face mounting costs and declining revenues. State mandates are increasing, adding significant costs and operational challenges. At the same time, concern for the environment is at an unprecedented level. There is great pressure on local programs to find additional ways to reduce waste and protect the environment. In Santa Cruz County, all of these factors were magnified by the small size and limited resources of the County, plus the strong commitment to environmental protection of the local population, nonprofit organizations and elected officials. The County was determined to find solutions to all of these challenges.

## SOLUTION

The County adopted a suite of integrated approaches to address these challenges. By coordinated Zero Waste Program efforts across multiple projects, we have been able to make meaningful progress to protect the environment despite the challenges faced by all counties:

- *Franchise Agreement* – A groundbreaking new franchise agreement with the County's waste hauler, GreenWaste Recovery, increased and stabilized funding while creating strong incentives for increased waste diversion.
- *Waste Characterization* – Ongoing measurement of the waste and recycling streams allows for fine-tuning collection, sorting, marketing and education programs to meet rapidly changing conditions
- *Expanded Outreach and Education* – Expanded staffing and increased investments in media have provided much more effective outreach to the community to provide consistent messaging in a confusing environment. Through school partnerships, every County child goes through comprehensive education in recycling and environmental protection.
- *Illegal Dumping* – A dramatically expanded education, cleanup and enforcement program has made significant strides in the battle against illegal dumping. We also created a new portal to report illegal dumping. (See <https://www.stopdumping.us/>)
- *Organics Diversion* – Commercial food waste collection which began in 2006 now includes more than 100 businesses, resorts, schools, hospitals and more, including all of the County's largest generators. Plans for residential collection and a new compost facility are well underway

- *Source Reduction* – Santa Cruz County has taken a leadership role in California and nationally by stopping many problematic products at the source. Efforts include among the first bans on plastic bags and Styrofoam, the first plastic straw ban in the country, strict requirements for recyclable and compostable food service ware, and a ban on small plastic bottles of personal care products in hotels and motels.
- *Extended Producer Responsibility (EPR)* – Santa Cruz County was an early adopter of EPR programs for products such as carpet, paint, batteries and mattresses, and created one of the first and most comprehensive EPR programs for drugs and sharps which became a model for statewide legislation.
- *Local and Regional Coordination* – The County works diligently with partners in local cities and counties to move forward together on joint projects

### **INNOVATION**

Santa Cruz County is well-known as an innovator in waste reduction and pollution prevention. Many of the programs mentioned above were the first of their kind and have inspired similar initiatives not just in the public sector but in the corporate world as well. A few examples include: San Diego's recent limits on plastic and styrofoam, modeled after Santa Cruz County Ordinances; San Mateo County's adoption of the Santa Cruz County ordinance requiring e-Stewards certification for e-waste recyclers, and Starbucks recent announcement that based on a successful response to Santa Cruz County's sustainable products requirements, they are rolling out similar changes to more than 28,000 stores worldwide.

### **RESULTS**

Despite the turmoil in the industry, Santa Cruz County continues to recycle at a very high rate. In addition to our commercial food waste composting program, we offer free compost workshops and free bins to more than 500 residents every year. County residents are dedicated recyclers, composters and fierce environmental advocates.

### **REPLICABILITY**

Santa Cruz County receives requests daily from other jurisdictions asking for assistance in implementing programs that originated here. We have documented more than a hundred instances of County ordinances being adopted by other jurisdictions, and numerous County programs have inspired statewide laws both on California and beyond. Recent examples include SB 212 establishing a statewide drug and sharps collection program, and AB 1162, which would take Santa Cruz County's limits on personal care products in hotels and motels statewide.

### **PROGRAM CONTACT**

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