

Fresno program aims to divert food waste from landfills

HIGHLIGHTS

Food will instead produce biomethane energy and feed needy families

Program is one of 10 highlighted by Greenlining Institute in new report

Report examines use of Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund money

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A new project in Fresno aims to divert tons of food waste from landfills annually to produce renewable energy and feed needy families.

The project is one of 10 spotlighted by the Greenlining Institute in a report examining how disadvantaged communities across the state have benefited from the 2006 Global Warming Solutions Act. The law seeks to alleviate the impact of climate change by charging major polluters for their greenhouse gas emissions and pooling the money in a so-called Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund.

Revenues are directed toward programs that further reduce emissions. A 2012 law requires that at least 25 percent of the funds go toward projects that help disadvantaged communities and at least 10 percent are projects located within those areas. The first funds were released late last year.

The report, released Monday, is a snapshot of some of the first funded projects in disadvantaged communities, including improvements such as solar panel systems, affordable housing and hybrid vehicles.

Disadvantaged communities are defined as those disproportionately affected by pollution and plagued by high unemployment, poverty and low educational attainment. To identify those areas, the California Environmental Protection Agency analyzed environmental risks throughout California. The analysis, called CalEnviro Screen, looks at more than 20 risk factors in each census tract.

Fresno alone has more than a dozen of the worst 20 places, primarily downtown, south and west. Other San Joaquin Valley hotspots include neighborhoods in Madera, Merced and Tulare counties.

The goal of the food waste project is twofold.

Colony Energy Partners, an alternative energy company, will create a facility in Tulare converting more than 110,000 tons of inedible food and agricultural waste into biomethane, a low greenhouse gas-emitting fuel. The fuel can then be fed directly into a natural gas grid or supplied as a diesel alternative for trucks. It will divert an estimated 65,000 tons of carbon dioxide annually.

Meanwhile, Colony partnered with Fresno Metro Ministry to launch a countywide food diversion operation, modeled after the Fresno State Food Recovery Network. The Food to Share program will take 65 tons of surplus food from restaurants, supermarkets, institutional cafeterias or farms and distribute it to food kitchens, pantries and other centers for families in need. It will divert some 47 tons of carbon dioxide annually to start.

THE FOOD RESEARCH AND ACTION CENTER SAYS NEARLY 25 PERCENT OF FRESNO RESIDENTS HAVE LIMITED ACCESS TO HEALTHY FOOD, MAKING IT THE SECOND MOST FOOD INSECURE METRO AREA IN THE NATION.

Colony Energy received nearly \$3 million from the Greenhouse Gas Reduction Fund, while Food to Share received nearly \$226,000.

Kent Hawkins of Colony said Food to Share is a small portion of the overall project.

“But it’s a great program,” he said. “Whatever food is not applicable to feed the homeless we can put in the digester. No food goes to waste.”

Apart from having poor air quality, Fresno faces high levels of food insecurity. Nearly 25 percent of residents have limited access to healthy food, according to the Food Research and Action Center, making Fresno the second most food insecure metro area in the nation.

The local projects are in line with national goals. Last month, the U.S. Department of Agriculture and EPA announced the first ever national target for food waste, aiming for a 50 percent reduction by 2030. A 2012 report by the National Resources Defense Council estimated that up to 40 percent of the nation's food supply is wasted.

Fresno Metro Ministry executive director Keith Bergthold said Food to Share has been in the works for nearly 10 months. He expects to begin moving food from donors to receivers by March or April.

The ministry is building a website where donors can let receivers know when they have food to give away. So, say a farmer has a surplus of green beans that will go bad in two days. The farmer will write that on the website, and anyone signed up to receive food will receive an email, call or text to claim it and pick it up.

“We’re trying to be the middle man,” said project manager Song Vang.

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Ruth Afifi

These are very important programs. It's good to know some of the results of the 2006 Global Warming Solutions Act. Thank you for the article.

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