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Date: September 4, 2015

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Viewing Waste as an Asset

“We have a major problem that we don’t even see.” In these words, author Jonathan Bloom is referring to the nation’s food waste crisis. According to a recent USDA study, 31% of the 430 billion pounds of the available food supply at the retail and consumer levels in 2010 went uneaten, amounting to 429 pounds of food loss per American. The estimated value of this food loss is \$161.6 billion. While Americans may be blind to the problem, the problem isn’t limited to food waste. More importantly, it doesn’t have to be this way.

The problem lies in how we value our waste. As we casually toss our discards aside, we give no thought to where it may end up. Our only desire is that it be taken “away”. Unfortunately, waste never goes “away”. It has two options: to be recovered for reuse, recycling, or composting or be disposed of in our landfill.

Ideally society would operate within a closed-loop system, recognizing waste as a resource and viewing solid waste management as more of a recovery operation rather than end-of-life material handling. This consumption and recovery model promotes a much more sustainable future, especially considering the declining quality and availability of natural resources, energy-intensive mining and processing methods, increasing transportation costs and greater consumer and manufacturing demand. It defines waste as an asset, an alternative source of desirable natural goods, rather than a price we pay for the cost of living.

However, the reality of the situation is that, generally, we don’t place this value on our waste. This lack of value can be observed by looking into your own garbage and recycling cart. Instead of seeing the worth of a glass jar or metal food container and treating it as such, materials are habitually downgraded to garbage, soon to be someone else’s problem once it is taken “away” during weekly collection. Many times, recyclable commodities never make it to our blue carts as the effort to separate the items is too great and the overall effect of a single person on the recycling and waste stream is perceived to be quite small (despite it being otherwise). In other circumstances, the items that do make it to our recycling cart are contaminated with food, liquids, non-recyclable materials like disposable diapers and household hazardous wastes, or other debris, forcing the otherwise recyclable material to eventually be landfilled, anyway. As such, our professed closed-loop system is quite actually bleeding valuable assets at every turning point in the path.

Luckily, the infrastructure for change is already in place. All that is missing is community buy-in and the realization that each individual has a profound effect on our County’s waste management results. Instead of hiding in shame, we can learn from our mistakes and understand that our waste has more value than to be buried in a landfill and forgotten forever. Have pride in the materials you put out for recovery. By keeping the commodity stream clean of contaminants, the materials will have more value

at market and don't have to be downcycled. Remember to rinse your recyclables and keep non-recyclable materials out of your recycling bin (contact the Tehama County Solid Waste Management Agency at 528-1103 for a complete list of acceptable recyclable materials). After all, recycling doesn't just recover resources. It creates jobs in California by providing quality materials for manufacturing facilities and promotes a healthy environment for the community and future generations. It's time we assign it the respect it deserves.