New regulations in California brought more haulers into the food recovery world

By Cole Rosengren • Feb. 1, 2018

Dive Brief:

• In the nearly two years since California's commercial organics diversion mandate took effect, it has created unique opportunities for waste and recycling service providers to step outside their comfort zones. For Republic Services, that has meant partnering with food recovery organizations and advising customers about donation potential when conducting waste assessments. Last year, the company facilitated the recovery of more than 300 tons of edible food.

• In Los Angeles, these efforts have become even more intensive with the recycLA franchise program. As part of its franchise contract, Republic purchased a new refrigerated truck for the nonprofit Food Finders and has been working with multiple organizations. This initiative resulted in the recovery of 150 tons from Jons Marketplace by Food Finders, 43 tons from Trader Joe's by St. Francis Food Bank and more than 10 tons recovered by World Harvest Food Bank for animals at the LA Zoo.

• The California Department of Resources Recycling and Recovery (CalRecycle) recently announced the award of $9.4 million for 31 projects over the past two fiscal years through its Food Waste Prevention and Rescue Grant Program. More than $2.6 million of that funding was for projects in Los Angeles.
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Following the diversion mandate, AB 1826, Republic and others began stepping up waste assessments for customers throughout California. This led to the realization that many customers, especially larger ones, had plenty of edible food available for recovery.

"The more that we promoted it the more that it got attention," said Tania Ragland, an organics program manager for Republic in California. "It's not a solution for all of our food waste generators, but it definitely does help with the larger ones."

Per the food recovery hierarchy, feeding people and animals is seen as the most preferable option after source reduction. It's also less expensive when tax credits are maximized and the volumes of material going to composting or digestion facilities can be reduced. Following the recent enactment of the California Good Samaritan Food Donation Act, liability protections have been clarified and new language is being encouraged to standardize date labeling.

Patti Larson, executive director of Food Finders, said all forms of education help, but the key when dealing with prepared or perishable food is careful planning. Her organization specializes in recovering that type of material and transporting it immediately to the final destination via refrigerated trucks. She says the goal is to keep the distance involved similar to that of a trip home from the grocery store.

So far Food Finders has picked up an estimated 250 tons from recycLA referrals by Republic and others. While recycLA wasn't the first time Larson had partnered with haulers, she said it has elevated attention and made generators think about recovery more.

"If it's going to affect their bottom line they're going to do something about it much sooner," said Larson.

Republic had a similar stance, saying that the annual waste assessment requirements in recycLA were unique even for
California. While the company doesn't have immediate plans to take this food recovery model to other states the experience could prove useful if that ever changes.

"I think what makes this new program unique is we are much more interactive with our customers than we ever have been," said Susan Passantino, Los Angeles program manager for Republic. "We have firsthand knowledge of what's going in the container."

Both Passantino and Ragland noted that when faced with the scale of their organic waste, and presented with positive options to feed families or zoo animals, customers are glad to find a solution. In the case of recycLA, where city officials and service providers have been taking heat for high costs, the customers may also be happy to reduce their volumes by keeping traditionally heavy, wet material out.

As the recycLA transition continues to be rocky, this aspect of it has been a bright spot that the Bureau of Sanitation, advocacy groups and service providers are all eager to highlight.

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🔗 PR Newswire
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