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Yolo's 'sharps' disposal works

By Beth Gabor
November 19th, 2010

Special to The Enterprise

Nearly two years into a state-funded grant project, Yolo County shows promising results from its pilot project to collect hypodermic needles and other "sharps" from local residents. The county received \$213,000 from the state Department of Resources Recycling and Recovery (CalRecycle) to establish a collection system for sharps and to educate residents and other stakeholders about product stewardship.

In 2008, the state banned sharps (hypodermic needles, lancets, etc.) from landfills because they pose a threat to sanitation workers and the general public. Many California cities and counties have struggled to develop a plan to handle this new hazardous waste stream amid budget cuts and personnel shortages.

Yolo County proposed a pilot project to CalRecycle to implement a convenient and cost-effective method of collecting sharps from the public.

There is an increased demand for proper sharps management. California has nearly a half-million diabetics who self-inject insulin daily, sometimes multiple times each day. That number is projected to triple by 2050, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Add to this figure the growing number of individuals who are treating medical conditions like migraines, infertility, arthritis and blood disorders with injection medications, as well as those injecting pets and livestock, and it becomes clear that there is a significant need for safe and convenient sharps disposal.

"Sharps are scary," says Heidi Sanborn, executive director of the California Product Stewardship Council. "The public wants safe, secure options for disposing of sharps, and we don't yet have a statewide collection system that has sustainable funding. So far, the state has failed to enact product stewardship legislation for sharps so counties and cities are doing the best they can."

Product stewardship means the producer of a product is responsible for the end-of-life management of that product, rather than relying on underfunded local government programs or garbage ratepayers. Producers have the ability to incorporate the end-of-life management costs into the price of the product and they are also the only party with the ability to make design improvements, such as reducing the amount of packaging used.

Sanborn said government and waste associations nationwide are calling for stewardship legislation to get producers to share in the responsibility for the products they make.

"Local government can't do it alone. We need help from the producers," she said.

Yolo County officials agree.

"We adopted a resolution in support of product stewardship back in 2008, shortly after the state banned sharps from landfills," said Supervisor Helen Thomson of Davis, who chairs the Board of Supervisors.

In an ironic twist, Yolo County recycling coordinator Pamela Hedrick is experiencing first-hand how badly a coordinated statewide sharps collection program is needed.

"My daughter was recently diagnosed with Type 1 diabetes and has to self-inject insulin daily," Hedrick said. "We've seen several specialists and visited hospitals, clinics and pharmacies in three different counties in the last week and we've gotten a different answer to our question about what to do with the sharps from each care provider.

"In some cases, the information was just wrong. The last thing you need at a time like this is conflicting information."

Hedrick noted that Yolo County's sharps project has been popular with users. However, the grant funds are limited, and when they run out in April, the county will have to consider if it can afford to continue providing this service.

"Product stewardship is the most viable alternative," Hedrick said. "We can't keep adding products to our household hazardous waste programs without raising rates. At some point, we have to find a better system."

Yolo County used grant funds to purchase sharps containers to give to the public as a way to educate sharps users about how and where they can dispose of sharps. Limited quantities of the free containers remain, but most pharmacies and drug stores sell sharps containers.

Residents can dispose of sharps at the county's household hazardous waste collection facility at the Yolo County Central Landfill on any Friday and Saturday between 7:30 a.m. and 3:30 p.m. The landfill is on County Road 28H northeast of Davis.

For more information about the sharps collection program, call (530) 666-8852. Prepaid mail-back containers for sharps may be purchased online at <http://www.sharpsinc.com>.