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EDITORIAL

- Contact Us
- Where to get a paper
- Woodland Record editions
- Letters to the Editor
- Woodland Journal

NEWS

- Front Page
- Public Notices
- What's Happening
- Capay Valley
- Davis
- West Sacramento
- Winters
- New Woodland Courthouse
- Locals in Service
- Regional News
- Fire Calls
- Badge Blotter
- Arrest Log
-
- Convictions/Sentences
- Capitol
- Archive print editions

BUSINESS

- Business News
- Biz Announcements
- Business Spotlight
- Historic Downtown
- Restaurant Reviews
- Restaurantes Mexicanos

SPORTS

- **General Sports**
- **UC Davis**

SPECIAL SECTIONS

- **...of the Day**
- **Tidbits from the**

County gives update on sharps program, free containers available through grant

From Yolo County, Public Information • Tue, Nov 30, 2010

Nearly two years into a state-funded grant project, Yolo County shows promising results from its pilot project to collect "sharps" from Yolo residents. The county was awarded \$213,000 from the 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 of California 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. 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 that 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 noted that 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."

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 Yolo County Board of Supervisors Chairwoman Helen M. Thomson.

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Front Page

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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 I Diabetes and has to self-inject insulin daily. 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 the County's sharps project has been popular with sharps users and has established that they're very concerned about properly managing used sharps. 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," says Hedrick. "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 out to the public as a way to educate sharps users about how and where they can dispose of sharps. Limited quantities of the free sharps 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 from 7:30 am to 3:30 pm.

As part of the pilot project, county staff collected survey responses from individuals that received free sharps containers. Sharps users were given the choice of either a mail-back container with pre-paid postage that could be mailed to a medical waste management firm, or a container that could be dropped off at community sites including the Yolo County Central Landfill. To date, Yolo County has collected nearly 1,500 pounds of sharps through this pilot project, which equates to approximately 82,000 needles. More than 80% of survey respondents state they believe the manufacturer should be financially responsible for their products at the end-of-life and 74% state that the cost of disposal should be included in the cost of the product. Respondents are divided on the most convenient method of return, with a slight majority showing a preference for drop-off locations in the community.

"This project is showing us that we need a statewide approach to sharps management, convenient collection options, and that sharps users want producers to help manage the products they manufacture," said Sanborn. "We know the number of sharps users is going to increase dramatically in the near future. We need a solution, and a statewide system, now."

Yolo County residents who wish to obtain a free sharps container or need directions to the household hazardous waste facility should call the Yolo County Central Landfill at (530) 666-8852. Prepaid mail back containers for sharps can also be purchased at www.sharpsinc.com

For more information about Yolo County's sharps collection program call (530) 666-8852 or visit www.yolocounty.org (link in lower left corner). For more information about the California Product Stewardship Council, visit www.calpsc.org.

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