

Solar panel recycling gets off the ground in Sonoma County

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Noah Abrams



photo credit: Noah Abrams/KRCB

North Bay Conservation Corpsmembers load recycled solar panels at the Zero Waste Sonoma collection event in June.

There's plenty of pathways to install home solar panels in California - the trickier part - removing them.

For North Bay residents, Zero Waste Sonoma is looking to plug the gap. Residents like Chris Cuppoletti.

"I wasn't sure what it was gonna do," Cuppoletti said. "Uh, we were gonna have to break 'em up and take 'em to the dump or what was the other choice."

Cuppoletti is just one of more than a dozen residents who recently dropped off unwanted solar panels at Zero Waste's first panel collection event held side by side with an e-waste drop off at the Luther Burbank Center in Santa Rosa.

Courtney Scott and Brandon Benton helped put the panel collection event together.

"Ultimately our goal is to recycle panels," Scott said. "This is true, yeah, I mean," Benton said. "Or reuse panels," Scott said. "Yeah," Benton said. "Either way we're, we're capturing them."

Scott is Zero Waste Sonoma's Household Hazardous Waste Program manager. Benton is the Zero Waste Program Manager at Conservation Corps North Bay.

The two have paired to get the brand new residential panel recycling program up and running, with the Conservation Corps handling and storing the panels before they are ultimately recycled or permanently disposed of.

For Scott, building a solar panel recycling program is about more than simple waste management.

"Cause some of them have things like lead and copper in them, which are hazardous metals, but it also has rare earth metals and those are the ones that we don't have a ground supply of in the United States," Scott said. "Those come from other countries and those are the ones that I'm really concerned about collecting and making sure that we are able to reuse those in the next generation of panels."

And Scott said recovering the components within panels is a critical focus.

"We have more need than we have material, and it's really important to collect that material so that we can help sustainably push the creation of these new panels," Scott said.

With such a new effort, Scott said part of her goal is to learn about the life of each panel collected.

"What I'm learning is that a lot of the people that have come so far, um, have gotten them secondhand," Scott said.

Another part of the solar panel discourse - the idea of extended producer responsibility. Scott said it's part of her efforts as well.

"Hopefully that looks like combining with installers and, and solar manufacturers to help us in this because your local government should not be paying for the disposal of items," Scott said.

The next solar panel recycling event is scheduled for Friday, July 14th in Petaluma - more information can be found online at zerowastesonoma.gov.