

Needles found at Recology recycling centers in Sonoma County at alarming rates

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February 4, 2019



(1 of 6) Workers separate cardboard from single stream home recycling cans at Recology Sonoma Marin in Santa Rosa on Monday. The sorters are finding dozens of hypodermic needles daily among the can, bottles and paper goods. (photo by John Burgess/The Press Democrat)



(2 of 6) Workers separate cardboard from single stream home recycling cans at Recology Sonoma Marin in Santa Rosa on Monday. The sorters are finding dozens of hypodermic needles daily among the can, bottles and paper goods. (photo by John Burgess/The Press Democrat)



(3 of 6) Workers separate cardboard from single stream home recycling cans at

Recology Sonoma Marin in Santa Rosa on Monday. The sorters are finding dozens of hypodermic needles daily among the can, bottles and paper goods. (photo by John Burgess/The Press Democrat)



(4 of 6) The hazardous waste can filled with hypodermic needles from one 10-hour shift on the recycling line at Recology Sonoma Marin recycling line in Santa Rosa on Monday. (photo by John Burgess/The Press Democrat)



(5 of 6) A biohazard can for hypodermic needles found by workers separating stream home recycling at Recology Sonoma Marin in Santa Rosa on Monday. The sorters are finding dozens of hypodermic needles daily among the can, bottles and paper goods. (photo by John Burgess/The Press Democrat)

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THE PRESS DEMOCRAT | February 4, 2019, 9:39PM

| Updated 2 hours ago.

Joseph Essig has encountered more hypodermic needles on the sorting line at Recology Sonoma Marin than at any other recycling center he has managed in previous years. So many, in fact, that the number of needles he's seen is too hard to quantify.

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On heavier days, sorters count hundreds of needles passing through the lines in a single shift. In one particularly bad period last year, he said his team was filling 50-gallon containers of hypodermic needles every six or seven weeks.

Not only is the exposure to needles dangerous to the health of workers, Essig said it is also costly and time consuming. The sorting line is immediately shut down each time a needle is spotted, he said, stopping the work flow. For every hour work is stalled, it costs \$600, the company estimates.

“It was getting to the point where we were seeing needles nightly,” said Essig, the company’s operations manager.

Recology officials say too many people are using recycling bins to dispose of used needles and other “sharps” – medical devices designed to pierce the skin, like syringes, lancets and pen injectors.

It is a dangerous problem for the workers who use their hands to sort waste placed in the blue recycling bins. Most people do not realize that there are humans touching their recyclables to prevent them from going into the landfill, said Celia Furber, Recology’s waste zero manager.

“Whatever people put in recycling bins, we have human sorters sifting through all of it,” Furber said. “They are extremely hazardous to workers.”

To reduce the number of needles winding up in the county’s recycling centers, leaders in the waste management and recycling fields have renewed efforts to educate residents on what they can – and cannot – recycle. Recology has also strengthened training programs for employees who regularly encounter needles and other sharps on the sorting line.

The problem has drawn attention at the state level.

A law signed by then-Gov. Jerry Brown in September is the first in the nation that will put the responsibility on manufacturing companies for the safe disposal of hypodermic needles and other sharps waste.

The bill, which goes into effect in 2021, requires needles and sharps producers to establish, fund and promote statewide take-back options for users.

Heidi Sanborn, a senior advisor at the California Product Stewardship Council in Sacramento, worked with local governments across the state for over a decade to get the law passed. The council works with cities to tackle waste management and recycling issues.

“The fact that it is 2019 and people are still getting stabbed on the sorting line needs to stop, which is why this bill is so important,” Sanborn said.

But until the law goes into effect, the burden of handling needle waste will continue to fall largely on local recycling centers and individuals.

There are three local drop-off locations listed on the Sonoma County Waste Management website where people can dispose of needles in hazardous sharps containers.

Residents can also search for additional drop-off locations by ZIP code on the website Safe Needle Disposal, but there are still only 16 areas listed within a 50-mile radius of Santa Rosa, some as far away as Vallejo, and many of which are available by appointment only.

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Sonoma County Waste Management Agency's interim director Susan Klassen recognizes the locations are far and few between for people to dispose of needles in the county.

A drop-off location in Petaluma used to offer free sharps containers to people seeking to discard needles, she said, but it is no longer offered after funding from a grant stopped supporting the program.

The county was close to passing its own ordinance last year that mimicked Alameda County, which in 2012 was the first local government in the U.S. to require pharmaceutical producers to fund a safe medicine collection program. But that local effort was stopped after the state law was passed, Klassen said.

To Essig, the needles are still a daily problem and the lack of drop-off locations is an imminent concern.

Oftentimes, Furber said people will put hundreds of needles in plastic bottles or milk jugs, assuming that is safe to recycle.

Like the line workers at Recology, employees at Napa Recycling are also confronted on a regular basis with issues related to needles.

"It's a significant impact and sometimes leads to us working overtime because we have to shut down our machines because we run 20 tons an hour at our site," said Tim Dewey-Mattia, who has worked as the recycling and public education manager since 2005.

Like Essig, Dewey-Mattia said there are not enough drop-off locations and needles will continue to be an issue at recycling centers until the law is fully implemented.

Multiple needle pricks were reported last year on the sorting line at Recology, Furber said, which prompted the company to take a more active role internally to prevent further damage to employees and their productivity.

"We give sorters reaching equipment like litter pickers and kitchen tongs to be able to remove the needles so we don't have to directly handle the needles," Essig said.

Recology also provides workers with \$80 gloves to further lessen the number of pokes from needles. Sorters have been trained to not touch containers or boxes where they cannot visualize what is inside, Furber said.

"It has been shocking to the safety team how many needles we have seen, and so we are now taking all the steps we can to protect our team," Furber said.

When an employee reports a needle prick, Essig said the sorting line is immediately shut down and the worker is sent to an emergency clinic. In some extreme cases, sorters must undergo one year of testing to ensure they did not contract anything, he said.

"We are always working to remind people that please, please, do not put your needles in recycling bins," Furber said.

Sanborn said the state law was passed because of a combination of luck and strategy, and also because of counties like Sonoma that were about to adopt local ordinances.

“That put more pressure on legislators to roll out something statewide,” Sanborn said.

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