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## El Dorado Disposal cleans up the county



WASTE CONNECTIONS Inc. Divisional Vice President Northern California Division Sue Farris talks with the Mountain Democrat in her office in Diamond Springs. Waste Connections is the parent company of El Dorado Disposal. Democrat photo by Pat Dollins

*Editor's note —  
This is part 1 in a  
two part series  
taking a look at El  
Dorado Disposal.*

“Garbage in —  
garbage out” aptly  
describes  
computer use. In  
the world of real  
garbage, however,  
it’s not that simple.  
In the world of real  
garbage, some of it  
remains garbage,  
but increasingly  
more and more is  
being turned into  
something useful.

Sue Farris of El  
Dorado Disposal  
talks trash with the  
best of them. Her  
full title is

Divisional Vice President-Northern California Division of Waste Connections Inc. And at a recent sit-down in her office on Truck Street by the Materials Recovery Facility in Diamond Springs, Farris described numerous examples of how her company deals with garbage, how it used to deal with garbage and how it plans to deal with garbage in the future.

The old landfills of yesteryear are dinosaurs that basically have died but haven’t fallen over yet. New processes, technology and expanding markets likely will direct the future of where garbage will go.

“When in doubt, put it in the recycling container, and we’ll sort it out,” is Farris’ mantra.

Single-stream recycling is one of the processes that will take recycling into the next era, and it couldn’t be simpler. Put all the recyclable materials in one can, and the company will straighten it all out at the MRF. The advantage to single streaming is that people who otherwise might not want to spend their time separating bottles from cardboard can still do the right thing by throwing it all in the same bin.

Nearly 100 people are employed by El Dorado Disposal. The MRF keeps 33 busy, while 42 drive the trucks and 23 are spread out between the offices and the shop facilities.

As a division of Waste Connections, El Dorado Disposal and its customers benefit from the parent company's resources, Farris explained. At a quarter of a million dollars or more per large garbage truck, the capital investment power of Waste Connections is essential to the local operation. Developing and harnessing emerging technologies is another area in which the company gains from its "Connections."

Farris beams when talking about El Dorado Disposal's connections to the community. Just as in recycling, "What goes around, comes around," and the company gives as good as it gets.

"We're all involved in different organizations. I serve on two school boards. We shop locally and donate in-kind to Snowline Hospice. We give our time and our dollars back to the community," she said. "We're very focused on children and the elderly. We have a project to support an elderly woman in Rescue, and we have a bike building project at Christmas. We collect gently used clothing for Partners in Care, and of course there is no charge for donations like that."

Being philosophically as well as physically rooted in the community represents a significant difference between the company today under Waste Connections compared to the company under its former owner, Waste Management. Farris has worked for both and has high praise for both — but she much prefers Waste Connections.

"Waste Management is a very good company," she explained. "It's very good and very successful in large urban markets, and it excels in open competitive markets. But that same style doesn't work in a small, rural market. I love the community-based philosophy Waste Connections brings to our area."

Since 2006, when Waste Connections took over the operation, the firm has spent about \$6.5 million in capital improvements at the facility, Farris noted.

Averaging 400 tons of garbage a day, the MRF processes specialty waste plus about 50 tons of "commingled" garbage, 50 tons of construction material including concrete, and about 100 tons of green waste.

"Over just a few years, county residents have quickly adapted to new recycling behaviors," Farris stated proudly. "On the Western Slope, over 40 percent of businesses are recycling now and every school is too. Red Hawk Casino and Marshall Hospital have huge recycling programs that have cut their garbage bills, and the school districts have saved thousands of dollars on their bills."

El Dorado Hills residents get extra kudos from Farris who said they "do the most fantastic job of anyone" when it comes to recycling.

A lot of what comes into the MRF gets quickly rerouted to one of a number of other locations including landfills and recycling processors and shippers. A main point of transfer is to the Pacific Rim Recycling company based in Benecia. Pacific Rim further processes, bales and ships the materials out to China and other Asian countries where it may be re-fabricated into something El Dorado County folks might buy a few months later. Cardboard and paper waste account for the largest single type of recycled material by weight that goes in and out of the MRF. Newsprint and glass are next, while plastic and aluminum, because they are so light, are a good deal lower down

on the bulk chart.

Farris said the transfer aspect of the process is a complex one, dependent upon market prices and competition, not just in California but around the world. And although Waste Connections does a revenue share plan with Pacific Rim, she said the prices paid for its “products” can change every week.

The processors have an advantage over the local companies because they have much more space to store recyclables — until the price goes up. El Dorado Disposal sits on 22 acres and could not store vast quantities of waste waiting for economic vagaries to stabilize in India or China. And China currently represents the largest market for recyclables.

While the towns and incorporated areas of the county’s Western Slope have the familiar “three-bin” waste program, El Dorado Disposal contracts to sort all the garbage from the unincorporated areas. By county ordinance raw garbage is supposed to be removed within seven days.

“We sort out as much as we can,” she said. “It’s a positive sort; that is we pick out what we want.”

The bane of garbage processing is the ubiquitous plastic bag, Farris noted. Plastic bags jam up the sorting and processing machines and have little relative value. Styrofoam is another substance that doesn’t respond well to re-processing.

“The future is about changing behavior such as promoting reusable bags and teaching our youth to reuse and reduce. We need a change in our overall purchasing behavior especially with regard to over-packaging,” she said. “In the last 20 years there have not been real significant changes other than recycling.”

And as landfills are closed and state regulations become stricter, dealing with garbage is going to get tougher in the future.

“You can’t get behind the curve in strategic planning,” Farris said, especially with respect to finding new and better ways of reusing and disposing of the stuff that comes in. That involves real science and technology, she explained.

Over 50 percent of construction and demolition waste is recyclable, and she said the company wants to do even better in that area. Concrete can be crushed to produce asphalt and road-base materials, while new technology is needed to get rid of green waste. The latter is a real problem because there is so much of it. It’s smelly and nobody wants it, so it goes into landfills.

Other substances bound for the Forward landfill near Stockton include the things nobody anywhere wants.

“We take all the animals from animal control,” Farris shuddered. “The deer are really nasty.”

Hazardous and medical waste go to specialized facilities elsewhere in the state, she said.

“The next thing we have to figure out is what to do with fluorescent light bulbs.”

### **The MRF — to move or not to move**

El Dorado Disposal's hilltop campus is considered by some to be prime land for development. The proposed Diamond Springs Parkway would run very near it, and plans for the area include a major retail development serviced by the parkway.

But who wants a new MRF in their back yard? No one really, Farris said. A 17 acre parcel southwest of the Diamond Springs industrial park has been proposed as a potential alternative site.

"El Dorado County asked if we could move, and we said, 'Sure.' They want to develop all the land where we are, but nobody has an issue with us being here. We've done all the studies relative to staying and we think the best solution is to stay and use the (Union Mine) landfill for green waste. We can figure out how to do it better here."

The company's Website, [eldoradodisposal.com](http://eldoradodisposal.com), has several posts describing the company and its services. Greg Jones of Jones Public Relations described the "RecycleBank" program during the meeting with Sue Farris. In a nutshell, customers who sign up are rewarded with "points" that can be redeemed for merchandise and discounts with local businesses. The points are automatically calculated at curbside on recycling day.

*(To be continued.)*

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