

Stuff your recycle bin, earn freebies in El Dorado Hills

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Getting paid for recycling once meant a few cents per pound for cans at a redemption center.

Now it can mean rewards for recycling you're already doing at home – cans, glass, paper or plastic.

The new version of cash-for-trash is kicking off in El Dorado Hills on Saturday, with California's biggest implementation of Recyclebank, a kind of frequent fliers program for household recycling.

El Dorado Disposal Service will weigh what is going into residential recycling containers emptied every other week at El Dorado Hills' 11,500 homes.

Route by route, Recyclebank will assign points to customers based on how much recyclable material comes in from their neighborhoods.

Once people register with the company, they can redeem points online for deals at merchants – local ones like Nugget Markets or national chains like McDonald's.

The hope is to spur residents to recycle more and put less recyclable material in landfills.

"CalRecycle likes any opportunity to incentivize, or cause people to recycle more instead of less," said Mark Leary, acting director of the state Department of Resources Recycling and Recovery, which monitors recycling efforts.

Recyclebank, a for-profit company, launched its first program like this in Delaware in 2007.

In many of the 300 places it has started up, there had been no recycling, said Sue Farris, a Northern California vice president for Waste Connections, El Dorado Disposal's parent company.

But Californians already recycle about 62 percent of the waste that's generated, Leary said.

"We are using this as an enhancement program," Farris said.

There are individual codes on each El Dorado Hills residential recycling cart.

Eventually, people may be rewarded for exactly how much they contribute to the recycling stream, but the current program works route by route.

On routes that average 66 pounds per month a resident might get around 2,000 points in a year, said Randi Desiderio, marketing manager for Recyclebank.

The dollar value depends on how an individual uses points. They can be redeemed as discounts, two-for-one deals or special offers.

A typical yearly value of those points might be around \$200, Desiderio said. For instance, a recent deal offered on the recyclebank.com site offered, for 60 points, a free 2-liter bottle of Coke when you buy another.

This, by the way, leads to more recyclable containers, somewhat in the same way that the Cash for Clunkers program reportedly led to the purchase of many new high gas-consumption trucks and vehicles.

Programs that provide incentives to buy reusable products or reduce consumption of nonrenewable materials altogether don't yet exist, Leary said.

"We're exploring that," said Lara Beers, Recyclebank's Western region sales director.

Even without it, Recyclebank's advocates depict it as a winning proposition all around.

Consumers get the deals. Municipalities save on what they're spending on landfills.

Haulers like El Dorado Disposal should end up with more recyclables they can sell to reprocessors.

"I expect there to be definitely an increase," Farris said.

Recyclebank is paid to run the program, and merchants get more customers, theoretically boosting the local economy.

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