



DATE: June 10, 2021

TO: Programs & Administration Committee
Planning Committee/Recycling Board

FROM: Justin Lehrer, Operations Manager

SUBJECT: Reusable Food Ware Project Update

SUMMARY

At its January 2020 meeting, the Waste Management Authority Board directed staff to conduct research and pilot projects to better understand the challenges of implementing reusable food ware at dining establishments in Alameda County. At the June 10, 2021 Programs & Administration and Planning Committee/Recycling Board meetings, staff will provide an update on progress and near-term plans for the project.

DISCUSSION

StopWaste has developed numerous programs around the concept of reuse, recognizing this practice as a desirable ‘upstream’ strategy for reducing waste and greenhouse gas generation. Programs specifically addressing reuse in the commercial/industrial sector have included work on [reusable transport packaging](#), the [Reusable Bag Ordinance](#), funding grants for reuse and repair activities, convening a reuse and repair industry [stakeholder group](#), and most recently, efforts to support the adoption of reusable foodware.

In 2019, staff presented options to the Waste Management Authority Board for addressing single-use food ware items, which are often made from non-recyclable plastic, compostable plastic, or fiber, are prevalent in daily life, and result in significant impacts to human health and the environment. These options included development of a countywide ordinance, development of a model ordinance for use by our member agencies, and developing pilot projects to help drive opportunities for greater adoption of reusable food ware in Alameda County.

In January 2020, recognizing that convenient and accessible reuse solutions, such as cup/container rental and dishwashing services, must be in place for consumers and businesses before implementing a regulatory approach, the Waste Management Authority Board committed funding and directed staff to conduct research and pilot projects. The purpose of the pilot projects is to test new solutions, help develop the market, and gain a better understanding of the opportunities, requirements, and challenges we must address in order to build a more robust reuse infrastructure in the county.

The pilot projects present an opportunity to develop reusable cup and container infrastructure and services that are currently very limited in the county. Staff will partner with member agencies and businesses on projects that will help us evaluate different approaches and better learn what solutions are most effective for different types of businesses and circumstances.

Shortly after receiving this direction, the pandemic took hold, leading to shelter-in-place orders and deeply impacting the restaurant industry. These conditions slowed our work significantly; we were unable to launch any pilot projects, and in fact saw public perceptions of the safety of reusables slide amid confusion over whether COVID-19 could be spread via surface transmission.

With the pandemic now in retreat and the State planning to lift many restrictions in the coming weeks, this effort is primed to move forward. On June 7, staff is producing a webinar highlighting three innovative services already operating in the Bay Area that make reusable food ware a sustainable, cost-saving option for restaurants, cafeterias, events, and other food service operations. We are also in the process of developing outreach materials, with the support of the County and City of Berkeley health departments, affirming that reusables are safe to use.

In addition, four pilot projects have been selected for funding through the Agency's recent grant solicitation. Activities include implementing reusables in a school district, in bulk meal distribution to food-insecure populations, and a study of the barriers and opportunities to implementing reusables in all school districts countywide, with the intention of facilitating this change in additional districts.

Next steps for the project include direct technical assistance work with food service businesses in three focus areas; education on the safe use of reusables, direct technical assistance to businesses that can switch to reusable foodware for on-site dining, and working closely with Member Agency staff and food business operators to identify and launch pilot projects that will help test, validate, and learn more about models for reuse in food service. At the June 10 meeting, staff will provide an update on these activities and near-term plans for the project.

RECOMMENDATION

This item is for information only.