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## Discussing the Future of Recycling

Leaders and innovators join forces at the Monterey County Sustainability Working Group meeting to address the recycling crisis

**SALINAS, Calif., Oct. 2, 2018** – It's been nearly ten months since China closed its doors to much of the United States' recyclable materials; starting the recycling crisis. California's recycling industry and entire sectors of the economy including the ag-industry are feeling the strain. **On September 27, nearly 100 representatives from across the fresh produce supply chain gathered in Salinas, California to discuss how the industry can prepare for the future of recycling.** Growers, packers and shipper, retail buyers, manufactures of irrigation and mulch film, government officials, packaging manufactures, waste management providers, and many others, participated in the event.

"Regardless of the enormity and complexity of the issue, the Monterey County Sustainable Working Group is driving efforts to urgently address the problem," said organizer Nikki Rodoni, Founder and CEO of Measure to Improve, LLC. "With this meeting, we begin working across the supply chain to find solutions and reframe the future of recycling for the agriculture and recycling industries in Monterey County."

With the recycling industry struggling to cope, ramifications are being felt within the Monterey County agriculture sector. At current pace, the largest industry in Monterey County will be without a recycling solution for a large percentage of the materials (waste) it generates. Growers, processors, and shippers will face significant costs to dispose of materials that have traditionally been recycled.

"Gone is the time when we could put our waste on a cargo ship and call it recycling. Materials that were previously recycled are going to landfill as the market for them diminished," noted speaker Teresa Bui, Special Advisor to the Director of CalRecycle.

Over the past decade, the recycling industry has grown colossal in scale. Global trade has allowed for otherwise empty cargo ships to be loaded up with millions of tons of California's and the nation's recyclable materials for export to China. However, China has taken a firm stance with its National Sword Policy which sets a strict standard on the amount of contamination allowed in a shipment of recyclable materials and bans many other materials outright. Cities, regions, and the state are now stuck with growing piles of material that they were once exporting for recycling. Declining recycling revenues are threatening the economic viability for current recycling operators resulting in the closure of more than 200 recycling centers

Tim Brownell, Director of Operations for the Monterey Regional Waste Management District discussed their capacity to handle ag-related recyclable material within the District's new material recovery facility, opened January 2018. "It is important to understand that recycling doesn't happen when it is picked-up. Recycling happens when materials are purchased and reused. Everything we do in between, is the process of getting it to that point. The materials generated in agriculture cannot be recycled curbside, however, certain materials can be recycled if they are clean, dry, and source

separated. Generators of large quantities of [ag-related materials] should work cooperatively with their suppliers to identify solutions for recycling.”

Looking toward the future, Louis Vasquez, Director of Corporate Development at Revolution Plastics spoke about the innovative ways the company is working with growers to turn their used agriculture film plastics into new products that can be resold back into the industry or directly to consumers. “We need to start considering things like extended producer responsibility; where it is the producer’s obligation to design products with all stages of the lifecycle in mind. The whole goal is to bring products to the market that are cost competitive and perform the same as a virgin (newly manufactured) product.”

“Plastic is an essential material but we must develop a healthier relationship with it. We cannot continue to create plastic from petroleum, a feedstock that takes millions of years to create, use it once and then throw it away. The plastic that is on the earth today will stay on this planet an estimated 500-1,000 years. Instead we need to embrace innovation to drive new solutions that will provide materials that are bio-based, bio-benign and biodegradable,” said Marcy Rustad, Chief Operating Officer for Think Beyond Plastic, whose presentation focused on how the industry can work with researchers and innovators to develop new packaging designs and materials.

Attendees also heard recycling success stories from The Central California Almond Growers Association, Netafim, R Planet Earth, California Giant Berry Farms, and Irrigation Design & Construction.

“The conference was a mix of information about the recycling of produce materials and challenging questions on where we go from here. Everyone, no matter their place in the supply chain, came away having learned something new and energized about what they might do next,” said Lucky Westwood, Operations Manager, California Giant Berry Farms.

“This meeting of the MCSWG is only the start of our conversation to find new solutions that address the recycling crisis for the Ag industry,” concluded Rodoni.

**About MCSWG:** The Monterey County Sustainability Working Group was formed in 2012 to network and share current successful sustainability efforts among agricultural producers and processors in the Central Coast region. By working together, the MCSWG hopes to lead the industry in taking a proactive approach to meeting the present and future recycling challenges.