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# Here's why your trash bill may go up in Orange County

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Starting this month, California is rolling out new regulations that limit organic waste going into landfills, reducing methane emissions that contribute to climate change.

Immediately, the changes will mean higher trash bills for many Orange County residents; in the long term, households will need to change how they throw out their food scraps.



A trash compactor pushes trash and compresses it at the Frank R. Bowerman Landfill in Bee Canyon. As of Jan. 1, the state says cities are going to have to pay to dump their green waste into landfills. (File photo by ISAAC ARJONILLA, Orange County Register/SCNG)

Cities are still deciding how best to comply with the new rules, some of which have yet to be finalized by the state. But the regulations will be a “game-changer,” OC Waste & Recycling spokeswoman Kristina Hamm said.

“The city faces the most stringent solid waste legislation in California history,” Orange Public Works Director Christopher Cash wrote [to his City Council as his staff recently](#) asked for a nearly 30%, or about \$4 a month, increase in trash pickup rates for 2020.

For decades, green waste such as yard clippings, was used as cover for local landfills, and it went toward a city’s state-mandated goal for recycling. The county’s landfills accepted cities’ green waste for free, helping keep down the cost of hauling away residents’ trash, Hamm said.

The county was able to use the grass, weeds and other green materials to cover its landfills, preventing debris from being blown around and stopping rats and other scavengers from rummaging through the trash pits, Mission Viejo Environmental Program Administrator Denise Matson said.

But as of Jan. 1, [the state says that’s no longer recycling](#). Cities are going to have to pay to dump their green waste into landfills, Hamm said.



The Costa Mesa Sanitary District provides plastic kitchen pails to customers, upon request, so they can separate their food scraps for recycling. (COURTESY OF THE COSTA MESA SANITARY DISTRICT)

Cities need to find new ways to dispose all that organic waste by 2022, diverting it from local landfills, Matson said. If not, they could risk [fines up to \\$10,000 a day from the state](#), she said.

Most cities are choosing between composting and anaerobic digestion, which offers the benefit of creating biogas for power.

The county has been running a pilot composting program at its three landfills for a couple of years. By the fall, its Frank R. Bowerman Landfill in Irvine and Prima Deshecha Landfill in San Juan Capistrano will have full-scale operations in place, Hamm said.

Matson and Hamm both said composting is much less expensive than anaerobic digestion.

“We wanted to crawl before we walk,” Hamm said. “Composting is a much easier way than building a giant digester that takes a lot more capital investment.”

CR&R, a large Southern California waste and recycling company, invested in [anaerobic digestion](#), building a facility in Perris, said Dean Ruffridge, the company's senior vice president. By the end of the month, 15 of the 18 Orange County cities CR&R serves will be using the facility.

“Anaerobic digestion is a more environmentally sound thing to do,” Ruffridge said. “It captures all of the gas and nutrients. Composting, we believe, is a Band-Aid.”

Also, many composting facilities can't accept food scraps, said Scott Carroll, general manager of the Costa Mesa Sanitary District. The district, which also serves parts of Newport Beach and unincorporated Orange County, [has used the Perris facility for years.](#)

“At this point, we believe it's the best solution to improve the environment and to meet the state regulations,” he said.

Regardless of what cities choose to do, they will most likely encourage their residents to use one bin to take care of all their organic waste. That means tossing food scraps and yard waste into the same bin, Matson said. In many cases now, a household's food waste goes in with its general trash.

It's a big change in habits, Carroll said, but something his district's residents have adapted well to.

“Once we started explaining how the program works and that it's not going to be that difficult to change habits, we didn't get any calls from anyone,” Carroll said. “It was such an easy transition for everyone.”



A CR&R project manager walks by tanks used by the company's anaerobic digester facility in Perris in this 2015 file photo. The facility is being expanded now. It accepts organic waste from several Orange County cities. (Register file photo)

Mission Viejo, which contracts with Waste Management of Orange County, is still figuring out how to handle its organic waste. For at least the next year, the city will send its residents' green waste to be composted at a private facility in Irvine, Matson said.

Whatever the solution, cities are going to be paying trash haulers more and that will trickle down to residents. Both composting and anaerobic digestion are significantly more expensive than putting organic waste in landfills.

Even for the less intensive composting option, Hamm said the county doesn't have a lot of space. Some cities may have to have their organic waste carried as far away as Victorville or Yuma.

This month, Mission Viejo is deciding on its new waste contract; residents could be paying the city [as much as 19% more this year – and nearly 60% more by 2022 – than they did in 2019.](#)

Hamm said while cities are still deciding how to proceed, the state is also finalizing its regulations – including how it may help counties and cities comply.

"This is extremely complex and fluid," Hamm said. "We are doing our best to prepare for it."

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## Jeong Park

Jeong Park covers the inland Orange County cities and communities for The Orange County Register. He was born in Korea but grew up in Southern California, bouncing from Van Nuys to Pomona to Westwood, where he attended UCLA. He spent few months in Indiana as a reporter before coming to the Register. He is always looking for good Asian food, which there are thankfully plenty of in OC.

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