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L.A. County sanitation district embroiled in fight over human-waste facility



A worker piles up material for composting at Tulare Lake Compost near Kettleman City in May. The facility mixes green waste with treated sewage sludge from Los Angeles County to produce fertilizer. (Gary Feinstein/Hanford Sentinel)

By **Abby Sewell**

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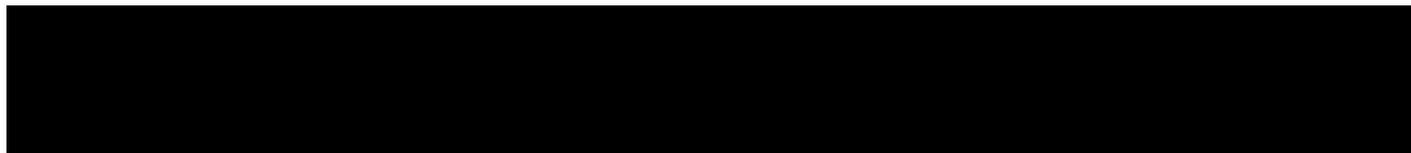
More than a decade ago, Los Angeles County sanitation officials made a deal with a Central Valley farmer that seemed to solve an intractable problem for both sides.

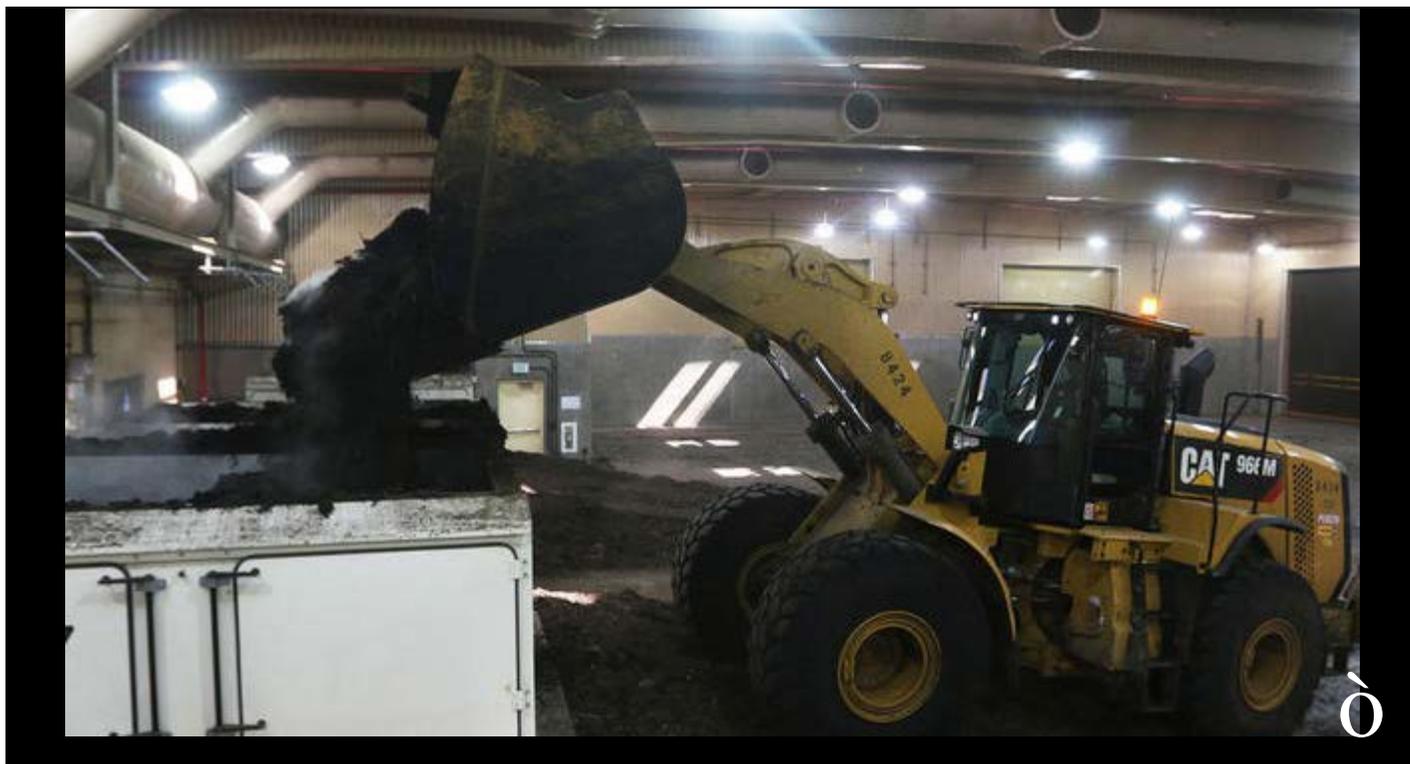
The 11 wastewater treatment plants operated by the Sanitation Districts of Los Angeles County were producing nearly half a million tons a year of treated sewage sludge from human waste, and it had to be disposed of somehow.

Meanwhile, Westlake Farms, a large agricultural operation near Kettleman City in Kings County, was struggling with both financial troubles and poor soil.

They entered into a deal to build a composting plant on the farmland, where the biosolids would be mixed with wood chips and other green waste to turn the sludge into fertilizer that would meet [U.S. Environmental Protection Agency](#) safety standards.

The fertilizer then would be used by the farm to grow crops such as cotton, wheat and alfalfa.





A front-loader dumps pre-treated sewage sludge into a mixer at Tulare Lake Compost in May. (Gary Feinstein / Hanford Sentinel)

The sanitation districts — which manage wastewater and solid waste for 78 cities in Los Angeles County, not including the city of Los Angeles — spent \$130 million to buy the land and build the plant, which finally opened earlier this year. But after the lengthy delays in starting, it is producing a fraction of the compost that had been projected. Now, the sanitation districts are embroiled in a legal fight with the farmer.

“I think we were seriously misled along the whole project,” Westlake Farms President Ceil Howe Jr. said in an interview.

Howe sold 14,500 acres of the 54,000-acre farm to the sanitation districts in 2001 for \$27.4 million. The districts would use 2,500 acres for the plant, wetlands and evaporation ponds; and the farm would lease back the remaining land and grow crops there using the compost.

Howe said he had been expecting that the plant — which was designed to process up to 500,000 tons of biosolids and 400,000 tons of green waste a year — would provide enough compost for the entire farming operation, saving him as much as \$1 million a year on fertilizer.

Instead, the plant started this year with plans to process only 40,000 to 60,000 tons of human waste, and it’s unclear whether it ever will reach full capacity.

Howe is now suing to have the sale undone, saying the sanitation districts have not lived up to their part of the deal.

Howe's attorney, James Ardaiz, called the plant a bad financial deal both for the farmer — who has been paying \$300,000 a year in rent on the 12,000 acres he leased back — and for the taxpayers of Los Angeles County.

“From L.A.’s standpoint, it’s just a \$130-million white elephant sitting out in the middle of nowhere,” he said.

Sanitation district officials pointed out that their agreement with the farm did not guarantee Westlake a set amount of fertilizer from the plant on any specific timeline. They defended the money spent on the facility as necessary to ensure the agency will have a way to dispose of biosolids in the future.

“We view this facility as an important investment in long-term, reliable infrastructure that is critical to our ability to provide our vital wastewater treatment services,” said Ann Heil, section head of reuse and compliance for the districts.

The districts currently send some of the biosolids produced in Los Angeles County to a landfill in Kern County and some to Arizona, where the matter can be spread directly on farmland, Heil said. The majority goes to five composting plants, including the newly completed Tulare Lake Composting Facility on the Westlake Farms site, which is the only one the district fully owns and operates.

She said that when sanitation district officials first started talks with Westlake Farms, they were concerned because a number of counties were banning the application of biosolids directly on land and were looking for a “backstop or fail-safe.” Originally, the biosolids were to be spread directly on the farm, but when Kings County banned the practice as well, they turned to the idea of building a composting plant.

Heil said district officials will analyze the economics of the facility after the first year of small-scale operation and then will decide whether to increase production.

“Like any project, you like to start small when you’re first starting it up,” she said. “Right now, we’re still in the ramping-up stage.”

People who live near the plant have expressed mixed feelings about it.

Some local farmers initially welcomed it as a boon to the economy and a potential outlet for their own green waste. The plant has taken wood chips from Central Valley operations since starting up, and Heil said the operators plan to continue to do so.

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But environmental groups concerned about air and water pollution sued to stop the project after it was approved by Kings County in 2004. They settled two years later, with the sanitation districts agreeing to use clean-fuel trucks for hauling the waste. If the plant were operating at full capacity, it would take 55 trucks a day — or more than 20,000 a year — to haul the waste there.

Maricela Mares-Alatorre, a Kettleman City resident and community organizer who opposed the project from the beginning, said she’s still not sold on it.

“It seemed like another deal where the Central Valley gets shafted by Southern California,” she said. “We send them good water to drink, and they send us back their poo. ... I can’t say I’ll be really upset if they’re not operating at 100%.”

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For The Record

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An earlier version of this article incorrectly reported that the plant had yet to take any wood chips from Central Valley operations. It has taken wood chips from locations in the Central Valley.

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