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A second life for Coastside farm plastics

Resource Conservation District's regional recycling effort diverted more than 41,000 pounds of used drip tape and other farm plastics this year

By Kathryn Wheeler
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On the Coastside, where farms dot the landscape, plastic has become an essential part of agricultural production.

The cheap, lightweight and waterproof material is used for greenhouse coverings, crop supports, ground cover and mulch to suppress weeds. It is also used for irrigation tubing, or "drip tape," that runs along row crops.

In an effort to reduce the amount of plastic sent from Coastside farms to landfills, the San Mateo Resource Conservation District and coastal farms have teamed up for the third year to recycle 41,460 pounds of agricultural plastic.

Aided by funding from the County of San Mateo Sustainability Department, the RCD collected used drip tape from 16 local farms and, with the help of a recycling company with specialized hauling equipment, transported the material to a facility in Paso Robles. There, the plastic waste was converted into pellets used to make new drip lines.

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The project, which began as a pilot program in 2021, was a response to recurring requests from local growers seeking support for recycling used drip tape, said Eliza Milio, the agricultural stewardship program manager at RCD.



Used drip tape from Coastside farms is collected for recycling through a San Mateo Resource Conservation District program aimed at keeping agricultural plastics out of landfills.

Photo courtesy of RCD

Milio said the RCD partnered with Andros Engineering, a company that specializes in agricultural plastics recycling in California, and began coordinating countywide pickups.

“We view this as a low-cost, high-impact, win-win initiative: it diverts plastics from landfills while helping growers adopt more climate-smart practices,” Milio said. “We intend to continue offering this program as long as the need exists.”

Drip tape recycling programs remain relatively sparse across California’s nine million irrigated crop acres. The state relies heavily on agricultural plastics because of its intensive fruit and vegetable production.

Recycling drip tape also presents challenges and is far more difficult than recycling household plastics. Because the material is covered in dirt and plant matter, often contaminated with pesticides or fertilizers, and expensive to transport from rural areas, it is more often discarded than collected and brought to one of the few facilities that recycle it.

More commonly, agricultural plastics are landfilled, stockpiled on farms, burned in open piles or illegally dumped. Each year, the U.S. agricultural industry uses roughly 126 million pounds of plastic mulch alone, according to Environment America. The group reports that in California, plastic mulch helps farmers grow more than a quarter of the state’s fresh fruits and vegetables.



Recycled agricultural plastic is converted into pellets that can be used to make new drip lines, giving used farm plastic a second life.

Photo courtesy of RCD

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Farms on the Coastside, especially in Half Moon Bay and Pescadero rely heavily on drip irrigation for crops like Brussels sprouts, leafy greens, berries and flowers, particularly because of water constraints and coastal growing conditions.

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Kathryn has reported for newspapers on both coasts, including The Red Hook Daily Catch, The Seattle Times, The Salish Current, and The Journal of the San Juan Islands. She has worked as a staff writer, freelancer, and photographer. She graduated from Wesleyan University, majoring in "Science in Society". She has also been a teacher and communications director.

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