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Low Oil Prices Pull Plug on Methane Recovery

THE COUNTY is in a serious bind as it tries to save money while being environmentally responsible. PG&E — which publicly supports alternative sources of energy production — won't let the county use its lines to transmit electricity produced from methane gas at the Buena Vista dump.

In April, 1985, the county opened a \$340,000 methane recovery system at the dump near Watsonville with the intention of selling electricity to PG&E. In the beginning, the giant utility bought up to \$20,000 per month when oil prices were high.

The methane recovery plant also reduced the risks to county workers at the dump caused by the noxious

gas (a byproduct of landfills that is a skin irritant and a potential explosive) while harnessing a natural source of energy that would otherwise be lost into the environment.

For 15 months, the plant was a model of environmental and economic efficiency. Similar methane recovery systems began springing up in other cities (the Houston dump produces enough electricity to power 17,000 households).

Then last summer the bottom fell out of the oil market, which made such alternative energy sources a lot less attractive to giant utility companies: it began costing the county more to produce the electricity than PG&E was paying for it, and the generators'

wheels ground to a halt.

Now the county wants to crank them up again, to power county offices on Emeline Street and the sheriff's substation in south county. The catch is that the county needs to piggyback its electricity on PG&E's lines, an idea the utility company — which would be losing that much business — is not crazy about.

"PG&E has been incredibly resistant about negotiating with us," said Mary Ann Johnson of the county's general service department, which oversees the generators. "They run their (power lines) over county roads and rightaways that we maintain at our cost, yet they won't let us run our own power to our own facilities."

PG&E spokesperson Bill Leonard said that "the county's request raises the question whether one customer who has enjoyed our services can leave our system and make the other customers share the cost."

In other words, Leonard said everyone sharing the lines with the piggy-backed electricity would be responsible for maintaining the lines, while the county got a free ride. The bottom line is that an answer to the county's request will probably be months away.

Ironically, if the county were to make electricity for its residents and were not a PG&E customer itself, the utility would be glad to let the county

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use its lines for a small fee, called a "wheeling charge." The cities of Palo Alto and Santa Clara have such arrangements, but the county cannot exercise the option.

Santa Cruz County is not alone in the problem. Cities and counties all over the country that have alternative sources of energy to sell to utilities are suffering from low oil prices.

Meanwhile, dangerous levels of methane gas continue to bubble up in dumps and the country becomes more dependent on foreign oil. For

its part, PG&E has disconnected its "Energy Conservation and Solar Information" number.

Such information is bad news to supporters of alternative energy sources such as the local Ecology Action recycling center.

"It's hard to justify the economics (of methane recovery)," said Christopher Williams, that agency's program development director. "It's a small amount of energy at a fairly large (initial) capital cost to make a landfill environmentally safe. But what is the cost of *not* making landfills environmentally safe?" •

—Sam Mitchell