

Command Packaging setting up recycling plant

Peter Grande has a vision to match his name and it involves diverting millions of pounds of agricultural plastics away from landfills.

The CEO of Command Packaging in Vernon, Calif., is moving forward with plans to create a polyethylene recycling operation that will capture farm waste to create reusable grocery shopping bags.

And in the process, he sees the probability of hiring 500 people to close the loop between California's farmers and California's shoppers.

Command Packaging's Encore Recycling unit expects to begin processing the used agricultural plastics in Salinas, Calif., in October to create the heavy duty shopping bags that are designed to be used over and over again.

Made from recycled agricultural film and drip tubing, these are not your father's grocery bags. At 2.25 mils thick, the bags will be able to carry up to 22 pounds and designed to be used up to 125 times during their useful life.

Grande is developing the project after seeing environmentalists and industry argue for years about the plastic bag issue without really coming up with a solution, he said.

"The discussion of whether we need or want plastics is a moot point. We all need plastics. We all love plastic. We want plastic. What we need to be talking about is how do we get smarter plastic? And that's what we're all about. We're going to show the U.S. market that it's not about plastic. It's about how do we get smarter plastic," he said.

Encore Recycling will use proprietary methods to sort, wash and pelletize the used polyethylene collected from farms in the state.

Estimates are that farmers in California produce 100 million to 150 million pounds of the material each year, and Encore Recycling is gearing up to handle every pound it can get its hands on. Farmers will be able to either drop off their used plastic at centralized hubs or arrange for collection at an additional charge.

“And so we’re going to recycle with a purpose. The purpose is take things out of the landfill ... that technology allows you to use today to make products that are green and can be produced in the U.S. and make sense for the customer, which is the grocery store, and the consumer and the environment and the industry. And that’s the vision and that’s the path,” Grande said.

Encore expects to start out with 40 workers as production begins in Salinas in October and the company expects that number to grow to 100 in 2014. Creating 500 jobs in a couple of years is certainly ambitious, the CEO said, but he believes it can be done.

“Jobs can be created very quickly, good manufacturing jobs, green manufacturing jobs, in the plastic industry if we’re just willing to do the things that are available today,” he said.

Capturing California’s agricultural plastic waste is one goal, but Grande also is looking elsewhere to repeat the idea. The Salinas location, he said, could serve as a model to be replicated in other locations that have agricultural plastic going to landfills in significant amounts. Dole Berry Co., for example, expects to save money by avoiding disposal of about 135 tons pounds, of agricultural plastic on an annual basis.

“Instead Encore Recycling will process the material for a new use. We anticipate that participating in the program will result in significant cost savings,” said Thomas Flewell of Dole Berry in a statement.

“In talking to the farmers, they’re frustrated because they don’t want to send their plastic to the landfill and nobody was presenting them with a solution for their problems,” Grande said.

“It all just added up that if we could recycle their plastic, turn that plastic into a raw material to make our [reusable grocery] carryout bags, we’ve really done something terrific. We’ve created a closed loop and we’re recycling with a purpose. So that’s become our mantra. We’re going to be recycling with a purpose.”