

WHERE WE LIVE

## Green business blossoms in West County

By George Avalos  
CONTRA COSTA TIMES

Sat, Mar. 31, 2007

A fresh crop of green businesses has sprouted among the industrial behemoths that dot the West Contra Costa County landscape.

Talking about businesses in the area conjures images of oil refineries in Richmond or Rodeo or sugar manufacturing in Crockett. Chemical plants and old steel mills also have been a staple of the northern stretches of the Interstate 80 corridor.

Lately, though, the preoccupation in the popular consciousness about operating in a green way has spread to the East Bay. And businesses in West County have started to ride that green wave.

"Businesses want their customers and their community to see them as green," said Robin Bedell-Waite, coordinator of Contra Costa County's green business program.

The East Bay has about 475 businesses currently certified as green businesses, according to a Times survey of the county green business Web sites. About 260 are in Alameda County, 215 in Contra Costa.

West County has about 50 businesses certified as green, the county's green Internet page shows.



Sherry LaVars/Contra Costa Times

Michael Biddle, president of MBA Polymers, drops a handful of pellets that are recycled and sold to make computers, refrigerators and other appliances.

Large and small businesses are on the green-certified list in West County. One small operation, El Sobrante mainstay Bianco's Deli, a few years ago became the first dining establishment in the county designated as a green business, said principal owner Scott Tuffnell.

"We were of a green mind-set already when we applied," Tuffnell said.

The county advised Bianco's about making changes such as reducing water flow and solid waste, increasing recycling efforts, even making suggestions about using both sides of the paper before recycling it. Water flow restrictors were added. PG&E showed up one day to conduct an energy survey, and low-energy fluorescent lights were installed.

Bianco's has continued to step up its green efforts. The delicatessen purchases biodegradable table cloths, paper plates and plastic utensils, Tuffnell said.

Over the years, Alameda County has certified about 350 businesses as green, said Pam Evans, of that county's Environmental Health Department. Contra Costa County has certified nearly 300, Bedell-Waite said.

It appears the interest by businesses to be deemed green will not abate any time soon. Bedell-Waite said she is swamped.

"I cannot keep up with the demand by businesses waiting to be certified as green," she said. "I have a bunch of e-mails sitting here. I haven't even had a chance to respond to them."

In 2001, Contra Costa County certified 18 businesses as green, Bedell-Waite said. By 2003, that number had risen to 34. Each successive year, the number of businesses the county certified has risen, reaching 55 in 2006.

So far in 2007, 15 businesses have been certified as green, and 17 others are going through the screening and approval process, Bedell-Waite said.

Some companies have made dramatic changes to their operations. Natural Grocery Co. in El Cerrito in late 2005 installed solar panels on the roof of the market, said Jennifer Sandkuhler, assistant general manager at the store.

The cost was \$300,000, although the store obtained a \$90,000 rebate from the state government. Despite the up-front expenses, store officials think the project is worth it.

"The solar panels will eventually have some economic payback, but it goes along with the philosophy of our store," Sandkuhler said. "We are a natural products store, and we sell organics. We want to do what is good for the earth."

West County also has attracted companies whose primary business is green-oriented. And it means new jobs for the region.

Recently, Berkeley-based PowerLight revealed plans to shift its operations and 200 employees to Richmond. PowerLight will undertake research, development and some manufacturing of big solar power systems at the historic auto assembly plant at Ford Point.

One of the long-term green players in West County is MBA Polymers, whose business is to recycle hard plastics that are difficult to process. Plastic parts from discarded vehicles and computers may well wind up at MBA.

"Hard plastics usually go in a landfill or are burned," said Michael Biddle, president of Richmond-based MBA.

"We see that residue as an ore," Biddle said. "We do above-ground mining. We take what is left over after the easy materials are removed. We have an automated, very high-tech process that separates out the things that are not plastic, and then we process the plastic."

MBA has received globally recognized environmental awards in recent years. Those include the World Economics Forum tech pioneer award and the Intel Environmental Award, Biddle said.

He thinks that the green trend is only going to accelerate in the coming years and that West County will be part of it.

"Clean tech is in," Biddle said. "We have been at this for a long time. It's nice to see that other parts of the economy are starting to wake up to that as well."

George Avalos covers the economy, jobs, financial markets, insurance and banks. Reach him at 925-977-8477 or [gavalos@cctimes.com](mailto:gavalos@cctimes.com).