
Sponsor: Public Health

Meeting Date: 12/2/2025

Title: Use of Solid Waste Fund for Capital Equipment Purchase

File Number: 2025-466

Background and Rationale:

Saint Paul - Ramsey County Public Health is proposing the purchase of wood waste processing equipment. Wood waste includes woody plant and tree waste like branches, logs, and tree stumps. State law prohibits wood waste from being put in the trash or being disposed of in a landfill or resource recovery facility. Wood waste volumes in the Twin Cities Metro Region have increased dramatically due to Emerald Ash Borer (EAB), an invasive insect that kills ash trees.

Approximately 2/3 of the wood waste generated in the region ends up at the Saint Paul Cogeneration (SPC) facility operated by District Energy in Saint Paul and is used as a biomass energy source. The long-term financial viability of this facility to continue to accept wood waste is uncertain as energy markets continue to evolve. Further, the oversupply of wood waste in the region is beyond the capacity of SPC to process and use the material, causing it to frequently pause acceptance of wood waste, sometimes for weeks at a time.

The Ramsey County yard waste sites are currently at capacity for receiving residential wood waste, and total reliance on SPC as an outlet for the material could potentially result in shutdown of the sites to the public. The Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA) has mandated counties in the region develop Wood Waste Management Plans to prevent and manage wood waste in each county and throughout the region. Saint Paul - Ramsey County Public Health is in the process of developing a Wood Waste Management Plan, which will include working with the MPCA to identify funding sources for these efforts and evaluating alternative processing methods and emerging technologies, such as biochar production, to manage wood waste.

Additionally, Ramsey County's Solid Waste Management Plan (SWMP) aids in addressing the wood waste management issue and tasks the county to partner with municipalities and other entities to prioritize the highest and best use of wood waste resulting from EAB and other causes. The county has worked with many partners to raise the urgency of finding near- and long-term solutions for managing the increased volume of wood waste, particularly waste created by EAB infestation. Ramsey County and Washington County have been working together on solid waste management issues for decades, wood waste included. The county participated with Washington and Hennepin County via the Partnership on Waste & Energy (PWE) on conducting studies on EAB and the wood waste management system and continues to work for legislative and regulatory solutions. In 2024, Washington County released a Request for Proposal (RFP) for wood waste utilization, giving the county the opportunity to partner with them through a Cooperative Purchasing Venture.

Proposed equipment improvements include the purchase of two air-curtain burners to be operated at a third-party wood yard. Access to the third-party wood yard and provision of labor associated with operating the equipment would be in partnership with Washington County through existing Washington County contracts under a Cooperative Purchasing Venture. Wood waste would be processed by the air-curtain burners into biochar. The resulting biochar would be used as a soil amendment and for remediation projects.

This equipment would aid Ramsey County and our municipal partners in managing the excessive amount of wood waste being generated and allow the yard waste sites to accept and process additional materials and wood waste that cannot be accepted by Saint Paul Cogeneration/District Energy. The equipment would operate concurrently at the third-party wood yard with an existing air-curtain burner owned by Washington County, reducing per-volume processing labor costs for both counties. By reducing emissions and producing biochar, air curtain burners offer a more sustainable waste disposal solution than current practices and coincides with MPCA's direction to evaluate alternative processing methods and emerging technologies when counties develop mandated wood waste management plans.

Recommendation:

The Ramsey County Board of Commissioners resolved to:

Authorize the County Manager to establish a project budget of \$2,000,000 in the Solid Waste Fund for wood processing equipment.

A motion to approve was made by Commissioner McMurtrey, seconded by Commissioner Miller. Motion passed.

Aye: - 6: Jebens-Singh, McMurtrey, Miller, Moran, Ortega, and Xiong

Excused: - 1: McGuire

By: 

Jason Yang, Chief Clerk - County Board