



## California Adds Fourth R—Refill— to Keep Propane Tanks Out of the Trash

Elizabeth McGowan | Aug 24, 2015

Five months ago, a fire at the materials recovery facility (MRF) in Sunnyvale, Calif., destroyed \$3,000 worth of cardboard and shut down the processing plant for three hours.

The culprit? A small propane gas cylinder exploded on March 17 when crushed within a bale of curbside-collected tin cans. Sparks ignited 30 tons of shipment-ready recyclable cardboard nearby.

Californians are supposed to take one-pound cylinders—which power everything from camp stoves, lanterns and heaters to scooters, boat engines and lawn care equipment—to hazardous waste collection events. However, thousands are deposited in trash and recycling bins annually.

For instance, workers yanked 5,000 canisters off the sorting lines at the Sunnyvale MRF in 2014, says Karen Gissibl, the city's environmental programs manager. The MRF also serves the Bay area cities of Palo Alto and Mountain View.

“They are dangerous and as soon as they hit the tipping floor, they are being handled,” Gissibl says. “That exposes all waste workers

to this potential hazard.”

Californians purchase some 4 million of the 40 million disposable one-pounders sold annually nationwide, according to industry estimates. To keep them out of the waste stream, the Golden State is promoting small refillable canisters that make reuse as simple and routine as exchanging the 20-pound propane containers that fuel barbecue grills.

Enter Kamps Propane. The 46-year-old company, based east of Oakland in Manteca, has taken a leadership role with a statewide campaign called Refuel Your Fun, funded with a CalRecycle grant. About a year ago, Kamps devised Little Kampers, refillable one-pound cylinders that can be bought and traded in via the company’s network of retail outlets and exchange services.

“We see the marketplace favoring refillables as an intelligent environmental and economic alternative,” says Josh Simpson, marketing director at Kamps. “The convenience of disposables will always have a place but volume will be reduced when people know you can save money and stop waste.”

Disposable one-pounders cost up to \$9 at discount stores and sporting goods stores, while the refillable Little Kamper has a price tag of \$11.99, Simpson says. Each exchange is \$1.99, so users doing the math soon realize the cost-effectiveness.

Kamps, which buys its refillable canisters from Flame King, is indebted to the Los Angeles branch of that business for designing one-pound cans that meet U.S. Department of Transportation safety standards.

Earlier this month, the California Product Stewardship Council recognized Kamps with an achievement award for its initiative in rallying producers, distributors, retailers, public agencies and other stakeholders around the refillable cause.

“This isn’t going to make them rich,” Heidi Sanborn, CPSC executive director, says of Kamps. “Instead, they’re trying to do the right thing.”

She is hoping this California model of a cradle-to-cradle system that favors refilling over trashing will be duplicated nationwide.

One-pound disposables—which can be recycled like any other steel once they are freed of gas by qualified hazardous waste experts—have become an eyesore and a financial headache at iconic landmarks, Sanborn says.

For instance, Sequoia & Kings Canyon National Parks spent \$2,656 for proper handling and recycling of the 2,125 cylinders it collected last year. And the Sunnyvale MRF spent upward of \$144,000 to properly dispose of the 16,000-plus cylinders workers pulled from sorting lines between 2010 and 2013, Gissibl says.

Communities such as Sunnyvale have spent grant money educating the public about keeping disposables out of the trash and recycling. The city also is collaborating with Sanborn's organization to encourage citizens to switch to refillables and support retailers that offer refill and exchange services.

Kamps, Flame King and Manchester Tank are the three manufacturers of refillables listed on the Refuel the Fun Web site. One of its newest online additions is a template for a letter or postcard that residents can send to encourage sporting goods stores, discount stores and other retail outlets to do their part on the refillable front.

"We're a small company with a small footprint," Simpson says about Kamps, which provides wholesale, retail and resale propane distribution statewide. "We'd love for other retailers to offer refillables because it's consistent with good product stewardship. That way we'll let the market take it to scale on volume."

He emphasizes that residential and commercial propane customers don't throw away their economy-size tanks when they run out of fuel—they reuse them.

Energy companies are often barked at for not being models of sustainability, Simpson says, but advancing the cause for refillable cylinders allows Kamps an opportunity to be recognized for something beyond donating money to community programs.

"I grew up in California, our company is based in California and year-round recreation is a big part of being a Californian," he says. "This was something bigger and much more interesting and challenging. We felt we needed to take a swing at it."

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