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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Supervisors Approve Composting Toilet Pilot Program

June 28, 2023 – On Tuesday, the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors voted to support a new composting toilet pilot program. The program will be the first of its kind in California. 25 eligible CZU Fire-impacted households working to rebuild their homes will have the option to participate and move back to their property faster as a result.

The composting system is also referred to as Container Based Sanitation (CBS) because individual households use containerized toilets that are kept hygienic with the use of sawdust and biobags. The containers are then collected and taken to a central location for composting. For the pilot, the composting will take place at the Watsonville Wastewater Treatment Facility.

The program will be managed by GiveLove, a California-based nonprofit that has established Container Based Sanitation systems in eight countries. GiveLove organized the first large-scale humanure composting program in Haiti after the devastating 2010 earthquake. Their programs supported the rebuilding efforts in Haiti by providing emergency sanitation options for internally displaced peoples camps and transitional shelters. In 2016, they also lent their support to the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe. GiveLove designed a Compost Toilet system that could function in North Dakota's harsh winter climate. It is considered the largest CBS system in the US to date.

This program aims to provide data on the safety and efficacy of these composting methods and to build greater support for composting toilets with state agencies. It also prepares the County to respond to numerous disasters. "As a Santa Cruz resident, I'm excited to work on pioneering waterless sanitation in Santa Cruz County. We need to prepare our communities for climate change and water scarcity," said Alisa Keeseey, GiveLove's program director.

"On the one hand, rural residents are clamoring for alternatives to the state's onerous new septic system requirements," said Supervisor Manu Koenig, who authored the proposal with Supervisor Felipe Hernandez. "On the other hand, we have to be ready in case a disaster takes out our sanitation systems." When the Pajaro River flooded in March, there was a moment when authorities feared the levee would break at a second location and bring down the Watsonville Wastewater Treatment Facility. If that had happened, a no-flush order would have been issued, leaving 60,000 south county residents without a flushing toilet. We need a Plan B for people to go number 2," said Supervisor Koenig.

Because of the implications of the recent flooding, Supervisor Hernandez supported the use of this south county facility as a test composting site and described the importance of the pilot in supporting new housing options: "there is a demonstrated need for this not just for the fire-victims in North County and the flood victims in Pajaro, but also for anyone seeking affordable sanitation options in the rural parts of our county or for their tiny home."

The Community Development and Infrastructure Department will return to the Board of Supervisors in August with a draft lease agreement to establish the Ben Lomond Transfer Station as a temporary collection depot during the pilot. GiveLove anticipates launching the program after engaging with eligible participants in late Summer/Early Fall 2023 and presenting their research findings sometime in the Fall of 2024.

For media inquiries or more information about the Container-Based Sanitation Pilot, please contact Manu Koenig at Manu.Koenig@SantaCruzCounty.us or call 831-454-2200.