



## 25 Years Later, Athens' City of Industry MRF Continues to Pave the Way in Recycling

Materials recovery facilities (MRF) are common in Southern California, but that was not always the case. Until about the mid-1990s, most cities used a mixed-waste collection system, which meant trash and recyclables were collected in one container. Very little, if any, recycling happened beyond newspapers, bottles, and cans exchanged for cash at neighborhood recycling centers.

In the 1990s, things began to change. California implemented new, stricter recycling laws mandating curbside recycling. And locally, Los Angeles County's Puente Hills Landfill was nearing capacity and limiting waste volume. Major changes were needed in recycling and waste collection, and Athens Services was poised to lead the way.

### The Birth of a MRF

San Gabriel Valley-based Athens Services, a local family-owned and -operated waste collection company, was faced with a dilemma: It needed to implement a new recycling program to comply with state mandates. The task was especially challenging, considering most cities used a mixed-waste collection program. The solution: build a mixed-waste material recovery facility like no other.

In 1996, Athens began constructing a mixed-waste MRF at its City of Industry (COI) location. At the time, the location

was nothing more than an administrative building, a few collection trucks, and a large empty lot. The MRF would open the following year as the region's first facility of its kind.

"Nobody knew anything about recycling, but we jumped into the materials recovery business," recalls Efrain Olmos, manager at the City of Industry MRF. He has been with the company for 41 years, most of his time at the COI MRF.

"Twenty-five years ago, there was no such thing as MRF equipment. None of the equipment used to sort recyclables today had been invented yet. So instead, we used conveyor belts designed for mining operations," said Olmos.

As the facility matured in its operations and processes, so did waste diversion in the San Gabriel Valley. The word spread quickly, and more cities using mixed-waste collection programs partnered with Athens to divert recyclables and comply with state mandates.

As regional landfills closed or neared capacity, hauling trucks from other collection companies began using the facility. The MRF represented a seismic shift in how mixed waste was sorted in the San Gabriel Valley. Today, the facility sorts up to 3,000 tons a day, diverting valuable resources away from landfills.

## How Innovation Helps the MRF Adapt to Change

Much of the original sorting equipment at COI MRF is still in operation. However, innovation continues to help Athens adapt to new mandates like SB 1383. In collaboration with Komar Industries, Athens recently developed the Organic Separation Press (OSP). The OSP is the first system of its kind to recover organic liquid from waste for reuse. Using a large auger screw, the OSP presses waste to separate nutrient-rich organic liquid. The liquid is harvested and transported to a wastewater treatment facility to be converted into renewable natural gas.

“Before the OSP, the liquid would have gone to the landfill and potentially turned into gases harmful to the environment. Now, those liquids are safely transformed into renewable fuel in a closed-loop system,” said Olmos.



***“At Athens, we continue paving the way in recyclables recovery and landfill diversion to help foster a safe, healthy, and sustainable environment in our community.”***  
— Efrain Olmos, City of Industry MRF Manager

## How Athens is Planning for the Future

In 2021, Athens celebrates the COI MRF’s 25th anniversary. Since its beginning, COI has been used as a model for newer MRFs. In 2014, Athens built a new state-of-the-art MRF in Sun Valley renowned for its use of artificial intelligence for sorting recyclables. This year, Athens will complete a \$40 million project to enclose and expand its Crown Recycling Facility in Sun Valley. Once the project is complete, Crown will be one of the largest and highest diverting facilities in the region. Later this year, Athens will break ground for its new flagship MRF in Irwindale, which will feature new innovative technology to maximize landfill diversion.

“It started 25 years ago with Athens having the foresight to build a mixed-waste materials recovery facility. Back then, we used mining equipment to separate recyclables from mixed-waste. Now, we use the OSP to recover nutrient-rich organic liquid and turn it into fuel. At Athens, we continue paving the way in recyclables recovery and landfill diversion to help foster a safe, healthy, and sustainable environment in our community,” Olmos said.

Learn more about Athens Services’ [approach to materials recovery and diversion](#).





## A Look Back: Construction of the City of Industry MRF

1. A view looking down the MRF processing lines.
2. The crew sorting material for the first MRF.
3. The construction crew pours concrete for underpass.
4. Cranes erect the framing.
5. Construction workers level cement for the grading of the MRF.
6. The crew after their training for the MRF operations.
7. A view looking at the baling area underneath the MRF processing lines.

