



County of Monterey

Item No.

Board Report

Board of Supervisors
Chambers
168 W. Alisal St., 1st Floor
Salinas, CA 93901

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February 03, 2026

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- a. Receive an update in response to the Planning Commission's request to address the regulations and enforcement efforts to curb unpermitted food vendors;
- b. Receive an update on enforcement actions and open cases; and
- c. Provide further direction to staff, as appropriate.

RECOMMENDATION:

It is recommended that the Board of Supervisors:

- a. Receive an update in response to the Planning Commission's request to address the regulations and enforcement efforts to curb unpermitted food vendors;
- b. Receive an update on enforcement actions and open cases; and
- c. Provide further direction to staff, as appropriate.

SUMMARY:

On October 25, 2024, the Planning Commission requested Referral No. 24.8 requesting a report on the Environmental Health Bureau (EHB) regulations and enforcement efforts to curb unpermitted food vendors. The Planning Commission requests for staff to provide an update on regulations and enforcement strategies to address unpermitted food vendors throughout unincorporated Monterey County.

DISCUSSION:

EHB has experienced a significant increase in complaints related to unpermitted food vendors operating in unincorporated areas of Monterey County. Unpermitted food vendors are selling or peddling food from carts, trucks, trailers, tables, trunks of their cars, or from their home without a permit from EHB. These complaints primarily involve pop-up taco vendors concentrated in Pajaro, Salinas, Soledad, Greenfield, Castroville, Prunedale, the Crazy Horse/San Juan area, and along San Miguel Canyon Road.

Since July 1, 2024, the EHB has received 223 complaints regarding unpermitted food vendors. The highest complaint volumes were reported in Salinas (72), the Pajaro (38), Castroville (30), and South County (27).

During the first 6 months, EHB prioritized education and voluntary compliance. EHB Inspectors contacted vendors, provided food safety education, informed vendors available permitting options, and requested that operations cease. These efforts were largely unsuccessful.

As a result, EHB escalated enforcement actions. Current enforcement measures include issuing administrative citations, impounding food and food equipment, and conducting administrative hearings. An administrative hearing officer issues final decisions, which may include destruction of impounded food and equipment, assessment of fines, and orders for recovery of the costs of EHB staff time.

Responses to these complaints require frequent site visits and often advance coordination with law enforcement due to safety concerns. Inspectors have been subjected to harassment and intimidation by vendors and members of the public. The District Attorney's Office Investigation Team has provided critical support by ensuring staff safety, assisting with vendor identification, supporting equipment impoundment and storage, and initiating enforcement actions. The District Attorney's Office is actively investigating the responsible owner(s) of these operations.

Through the District Attorney's Office, it has been determined that the majority of these vendors are not small, independent operators but are part of a large, organized operation headquartered in Merced County. This organization operates across multiple counties in California and in other states, including Arizona and New Mexico. However, there may be multiple types of stands operating within the county, including those directly related to the Merced based operation, those that originated as subordinate operations but are now operating independently, and smaller pop-up vendors not affiliated with the Merced operation. District Attorney's Office and EHB continues to evaluate these distinctions.

The EHB has determined that these vendors do not intend to comply with health permitting requirements. To effectively deter and disrupt this organized activity, continued and enhanced law enforcement involvement is necessary. This includes pursuing vehicle impoundment under Vehicle Code § 22655.5 and, where appropriate, criminal prosecution. These measures are essential to protect public health, ensure staff safety, and maintain equitable enforcement for permitted food operators within Monterey County.

The EHB has an established health permitting process that requires food operators to complete and submit a health permit application, food facility packet application, a food menu, and commissary form (identifying where is food bought, prepared and stored). The EHB operates under the regulatory responsibilities of the California Retail Code (CRR) which states that food vendors who wish to prepare and sell food must apply for a health permit with the Environmental Health Department. A health permit application must be submitted for review and an EHB inspector will assist with issuing the correct type of permit depending on food operations. The CRR addresses the following key essentials:

- Food in good condition/ safe and unadulterated - All food shall be from an approved source, and shall be produced, prepared, compounded, packed, transported, kept for sale, and served so as to be pure, free from adulteration and spoilage.
- Compliance with food law - Food shall be obtained from sources that comply with all applicable laws.
- Permits, fees, and posting: A food facility shall not be open for business without a valid Health Permit.
- Hands clean/properly washed - Employees are required to wash their hands before handling

food, during food preparation when necessary, and after using the toilet or anytime when contamination may result.

- Toilet and handwashing facilities - A food facility shall be operated within 200 feet travel distance of an approved and readily available toilet and handwashing facility, or as otherwise approved by the enforcement agency to ensure that restrooms facilities are available to facility employees.
- Food Contact Surface/Utensils Washing - All food contact surfaces of utensils and equipment shall be cleaned and sanitized at the required frequencies. All food facilities handling open food shall be equipped with a ware washing sink with dish soap and sanitizer unless otherwise approved.
- Food preparation area, protection from contamination - All food shall be thawed, washed, sliced, and cooled, within an approved fully enclosed food facility.

OTHER AGENCY INVOLVEMENT

The County of Monterey Health Department, Environmental Health Bureau has worked collaboratively with the Monterey County District Attorney's Office. The Office of County Counsel has reviewed this report as to form.

FINANCING:

There are no fiscal provisions; therefore, there is no impact to the General Fund with the acceptance of this staff update.

BOARD OF SUPERVISORS STRATEGIC PLAN GOALS:

Addressing the regulations and enforcement strategies to address unpermitted food vendors throughout unincorporated Monterey County are essential to protect public health, ensure staff safety, and maintain equitable enforcement for permitted food operators within Monterey County.

Mark a check next to the related Board of Supervisors Strategic Plan Goals:

- ☒ Well-Being and Quality of Life
- ☐ Sustainable Infrastructure for the Present and Future
- ☐ Safe and Resilient Communities
- ☐ Diverse and Thriving Economy

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Attachments:

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Planning Commission PC 25-012

Presentation