



MOTHER EARTH NEWS

Landfill Salvage: The Benefits of Waste Recovery

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By the MOTHER EARTH NEWS editors



A waste recovery operation could potentially find still useable material hidden amidst a pile of junk, thus diverting it from municipal landfills and saving space.

PHOTO: FOTOLIA/ALEXANDER NIKULIN

Not so many years ago, most local garbage dumps were alive with on-the-spot waste recovery and recycling. Folks would come by to drop off something "useless" and—more often than not—discover items that *they* needed among the material that had been left for junk by other people. Frequently, the dumps were managed by old-time local residents, individuals who had a flair for setting aside select pieces of trash, knowing they would soon be another person's treasures.

Today, landfill salvage is all but a lost art. It's not that folks are no longer interested in reusing things, though. The problem is that, at most city and town dumps, landfill salvage is illegal. People can get hurt rummaging through the garbage, the reasoning goes, and might salvage goods that could be unhealthy or hazardous.

The argument sounds logical, too, until you consider how much a well-managed landfill salvage operation can boost a community's self-reliance without any significant danger. First, when material that would otherwise go to waste is rescued, local dumps don't fill up so rapidly. Thus the need for expensive disposal alternatives, such as long-distance hauling or incinerators, is postponed and perhaps avoided indefinitely.

Salvage also saves energy. Far more BTU go into manufacturing a new stove than into fixing up an old one.

And finally, dump foraging creates jobs; some of the money earned by selling reusable material goes toward paying staff salaries. (In landfill without salvage, on the other hand, valuable resources are lost forever, and citizens are taxed to pay for the destruction.)

A few communities, distressed by rapidly filling dump areas, have rediscovered the value of landfill recycling. In Oregon's Lane County, for instance, recyclers convinced waste management officials to run a ten-week experiment. At the end of the test, about 70 tons of material had been diverted from the dump, producing just over \$3,200 in revenue. County officials were so pleased with the results that they now run a permanent landfill salvage program, through a private contractor.

Close by in Dexter, Oregon, recyclers have proved that landfill salvage doesn't have to be expensive or complicated to produce significant results. Traditionally, Dexter residents had used a one-day "community cleanup" campaign to haul trash to the local fire station, where it was later shipped to a dump. Recently, however, a community group decided to institute a program to salvage as much of the "junk" as possible.

The promotional literature prepared for Dexter's campaign explained that a temporary recycling center would be established to receive, sort, and sell metals and other recyclables. As a result, two workers—using a single truck and a rented bin—salvaged three tons of throw-aways in one day! Not only was the material diverted from the local dump, but revenue from its resale helped pay for a community barbecue and dance the next day.

Probably the most elaborate existing landfill salvage program is in Berkeley, California, where—not long ago—city officials became desperate for alternatives to a dump almost filled to capacity. The city awarded a management contract to two experienced recyclers, who first renamed the operation, calling it the Bay Cities Resource and Recovery Depot. They now employ a staff of eight people.

The crew is recycling, among other material, seven tons of iron a day. Operators say they could employ as many as 30 people to salvage materials from the city's castoffs. Future plans include repairing appliances, reupholstering furniture, and putting old bicycles back on the road.

If landfill salvage has so much potential, you may wonder why so few communities are doing it. One reason may be an "out of sight, out of mind" attitude about trash, particularly on the part of federal waste management officials who set the tone for the way local communities handle garbage. The Environmental Protection Agency, for example, provides extensive technical assistance, and millions in subsidies, to help communities cover over or burn garbage. Recycling techniques like landfill salvage, on the other hand, are often said by such agencies to be ineffective and impractical. Because most communities depend upon substantial amounts of federal money to pay for their waste disposal programs, local administrators are quick to fall in line with what they take to be official federal thinking ... especially when grants and subsidies can be held up if a dump isn't operating in the "approved" manner.

When run by professionals, however, landfill salvage is neither dangerous nor unhealthful. And the benefits—lower disposal costs, recovery of valuable materials, increased energy savings, and more employment—are too great to overlook.

For the past several years, the good folks at the Institute for Local Self-Reliance in Washington, D.C. have worked to help urban residents gain greater control over their lives through the use of low-technology, decentralist tools and concepts. We strongly believe that more people (city dwellers and country folk alike) should be exposed to the Institute's admirable efforts ... which is why we've made this "what's happening where" report by ILSR staffers one of MOTHER EARTH NEWS' regular features.