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What goes around: Research underway to re-use 'retired' tires

AMANDA HAFLELE For THE NEWS 16 hrs ago



In 1983, seven million waste tires caught fire in Rhinehart, Virginia and burned for nine months. Toxic smoke spread to three neighboring states. Three years later in Wisconsin, millions of waste tires went up in flames in Somerset and burned for weeks.

During this time, it was estimated that 15 to 20 million waste tires lay stockpiled in Wisconsin. As defined by the Wisconsin State Legislature, waste tires are tires that are no longer suitable for their original purpose because of wear, damage or defect. Stockpiles were formed to avoid landfill fees as many landfills stopped accepting them for disposal or property owners thought one day the tires would have re-sale or reuse value.

Legislative solution

Due to fires and stockpiling of waste tires, the state Legislature passed a law, in May of 1988, creating a Waste Tire Removal and Recovery Program in the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources. This program provided staff and funding to address the problems associated with stockpiling and the lack of markets. A \$2 per tire fee on new vehicles was created to fund this program.

It is estimated that the WDNR cleaned up 12 million tires at 162 sites and private organizations cleaned up four million tires at 408 sites. The tires were processed into fuel and used to generate energy. The Legislature ended this program in 1997.

Landfill hazard

Waste tires were identified as problematic in landfills and are known to breed disease carrying mosquitoes and rodents. In landfills, tires don't compress well and spring back to shape, taking up valuable air space.

They also migrate or float up to the surface of closed landfills and puncture the top liner or barrier. Due to these hazards as well as to encourage recycling markets, waste tires were banned from landfills beginning on Jan. 1, 1995.

According to the Product Stewardship Institute, 43 percent of waste tires are reused or recycled in the United States. Ground tires are used mostly in specialty markets such as tracks, athletic fields, playgrounds, colored for mulch or shoe soles. Other uses include