



TIRE CARE

With the delicate touch of a high wire artist, Mel tiptoed across the misplaced, man-made mountain, careful of making a wrong step. A curious raccoon or skunk would pop its head out from a rubber donut hole to see what he was doing. With solid footing on this 15-foot-high rubber pile, Mel took a deep breath and surveyed the terrain atop 15 acres of greyish-black warped tread. He was surrounded by three million illegally disposed tires.

Now Mel Pins is the DNR's Brownfield Redevelopment Program Coordinator. But, in 1997, Mel was hired by the DNR to tackle Iowa's tire problem. A tire dealer can easily generate 500 scrap tires per week. Mel does the math, saying, "Statewide, that's 3 million tires per year, almost 30,000 plus tons of material per year."

Through the years, he developed Superman-like x-ray vision to laser in on tire piles. Behind an abandoned building. Dumped in a ravine. Stockpiled behind an old used car dealership. Visual clues tell if "the owner is carrying a load of bad debt."

"I've learned old tires are like credit card abuse," he explains, "a few purchases don't amount to much trouble. But, if you don't pay your bill monthly, you collect a world of hurt with debt. Disposal costs of four tires at replacement is nominal, but compare that to collecting 100 tires. Disposal costs can seem overwhelming."

"Weeds are probably the number one giveaway," Mel says. Thistle, foxtail, ragweed and wild parsnip can quickly take over a neglected tire pile.

DNR environmental field office supervisor Kurt Levetzow works in southeast Iowa. Like other DNR field offices, he sees tire piles, too. "More frustrating than the tire piles," he quips, is "there are locations throughout the state to properly dispose or recycle, but some people just dump a tire pile of tires or burn them."

"What about disposing tires yourself? Isn't that possible?" I offer.

"You bet. But, before a landfill can accept waste tires, tires have to be cut up in 18-inch chunks. Do you have anything at home that can cut through a tire?"

"Hmmm, not really."

"Right. So, a person can, but it's cumbersome and difficult."

"So, what's the solution?" I ask.

"Easy. Don't take problems home. Let tire shops take waste tires off your hands. Tire shops can properly manage waste tires," Kurt says resolutely. Waste tires vary from used tires, which can be reused, he says. "Waste tires are no longer suitable to use; used tires still have some tread left."

I recall my first car at age 16, my grandfather's '74 VW Beetle. Originally yellow with white leather seats, my dad and I worked to restore it to a turquoise metallic with black leather seats. (Oh yeah, turquoise metallic. And it was amazing!) I never forgot the Penny Test, where you turn a penny so Lincoln's head points into the tread. If the top of his head disappears, your tread is good. If you see his head, the tread is too worn. A waste tire.

Kurt continues, "Unfortunately, people try to convince the DNR that the tires are usable, even if they aren't, just to store them longer." That justification doesn't pass the laugh test.

"What's the big deal?" I ask Mel, "They're just tires."

Shaking his head slowly, it's obvious he's answered this before.

"A tire seems stable and innocuous, but there are multiple problems with keeping tires, thinking we'll find a later use, or that we don't want to pay to properly manage them now. At some point, they become a liability and need proper disposal."

"First, it's a human health risk. Have you tried to get water out of an old tire? It's almost impossible. They are great mosquito breeding grounds. The more tires, the larger mosquito populations grow," he says. They are a fire hazard, too. If a tire pile burns they are very hard to extinguish. You can't use water," he says, because it's an oil-based fire. The smoke is unreal.

"Then you have pyrolytic oil..." he says.

Melted by fire, tires ooze a black soup that seeps this pyrolytic oil across the ground, contaminating soil and groundwater.

No one likes tire piles. A waste tire garbage collection is not pretty, plus open dumping tires is illegal—banned in 1991.

"I always thought tires could be recycled or used for other things," I ask. Again, Mel nods. He's been asked this before.

"Yes, to an extent. The problem? Tires aren't regular waste. They take more consideration and time to manage. But, there are some



Tire burning, long banned, makes a dangerous mess of toxic, dense smoke visible for miles. Nearby tires melt and ooze oil-based fuel onto the ground. Not extinguished by water or foam, tire fires must be smothered with heavy equipment. Report tire burning to DNR officials.



Decades ago, Iowa was plagued with massive, tire piles and ugly, mosquito-ridden consequences. After hard work, big piles are fewer, but illegal dumping still happens. The best solution is to pay for proper disposal first, rather than accumulating a debt's worth of misery.

beneficial uses after their time on a vehicle is over," says Mel.

Historically old tires were used for swings, racetrack barriers and silage covers (with tires cut in half like a bagel, so they can't hold water to incubate mosquitoes.) Today, tire processors and recyclers manufacturer tire chips and crumb rubber for athletic surfaces, playgrounds or as a fuel supplement.

"But often, other uses were just poor substitutes for proper disposal. Decades ago, landowners used them for streambank or erosion control. But tires float and those uses caused more harm than good. The real benefit at the time was easy disposal," he says.

"Tires are intentionally built to weather tough, extreme conditions, hot summers and frigid winters," says Mel. Made of complex blends of natural and synthetic rubber, nylon, polyester and high strength steel bead wire, they are not designed for easy recycling. The process to break them down into a second use is costly. Plus, markets only pay so much, especially as recycled tire must compete with lower-cost materials as an ingredient, aggregate or fuel. That's why it costs to dispose worn tires.

"The best, most efficient, economical path for a tire when it's no longer fit for use is to let a properly permitted waste tire hauler take them. Don't take them home. Don't let someone store theirs on your property. Just 'pay off that debt' early and often," he says.

I add, "Used tires sound like a bad penny."

"Yeah, I see that comparison," Mel says. "They always turn up somewhere; but doing it right is a lot less expensive, better for neighbors and complies with Iowa's regulations. Disposing old tires timely is a small cost to avoid big headaches later. There's no need to take a problem home with you."

Make sure tire haulers or recyclers are DNR-registered and permitted. If not, you don't know where that tire will go. "We've seen warehouses and mini-storage units filled floor-to-ceiling with old

tires. Someone collected disposal money, then left them for others to dispose. Property owners are responsible to clean out tires," he says.

So why is Mel Pins passionate about waste tires? It's not even his main DNR job anymore.

"Iowa had a problem with big tire stockpiles more than 20 years ago. One immense site was a former meat packing plant. Tire piles covered outdoor cattle pens, railroad sidings and filled a building floor to ceiling! We cleaned it.

"I don't want to go back to that. We addressed problems collectively, directly. The legislature provided funds. Regulations were clarified. And, we emphasized public education and outreach. Today, we have clear processes, registered waste tire haulers, processors and end-markets in-state, regionally and nationally. Today there are less tires floating down rivers, dumped in ravines, stockpiled or burned illegally.

"Iowa is too beautiful to go backwards," he says. 🐾

FIND YOUR AREA ENVIRONMENTAL FIELD OFFICE

Open dumping or burning of tires (among other issues) can be reported to The Iowa DNR Field Services and Compliance Bureau which has six field offices across Iowa.

They serve as a point of contact for questions about environmental protection activities and problems. Field office staff help citizens, business and industry comply with environmental programs. The goal is to coach compliance rather than collect penalties.

Field office staff conduct routine inspections, provide technical assistance, investigate complaints from the public and respond to spills of hazardous substances. Find your area environmental field office at iowadnr.gov/fieldoffice or use the 24-hour environmental hotline at **515-725-8694**.

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