

JIM MOTAVALLI

New York Times contributor blogs about cars and other interesting ways of getting around.



America's tire mountains: 90 percent are gone, thanks to recycling programs

Once we had 2 billion tires scattered around the U.S. landscape, but now 90 percent of the piles are gone. Ground rubber from tires is becoming roadways, playground equipment and auto floor mats.

Wed, Apr 02, 2014 at 09:14 AM

5519 Like 112 Tweet 20 Pin it 0 share



Colorado's Tire Mountain, the world's largest dump, where fear of fire is a constant concern. (Photo: John Sheerin/Bridgestone)

Tires. We don't think about them all that much unless a) we have a flat; b) we have to buy new ones; or c) the summer tires just aren't cutting it in the winter, or vice versa. But tires are a big deal in the environment, because we produce — and discard — so many of them. In 2009, the most recent year available, we generated 296 million scrap tires, with passenger cars accounting for 189 million of them.

The good news is that we're "repurposing" 80 percent of our scrap tires today. Remember the famous tire mountains? Well, they're mostly gone now. According to Michael Blumenthal, vice president of the Rubber Manufacturers Association, by 1990 some 48 states had scrap tire laws of some kind (after Minnesota became the first to pass a law in 1985). Consider the scope of the problem they were dealing with — an estimated 2 to 3 billion tires that were in stockpiles back then, and only 11 percent of tires were going to end-use markets. Today, 90 percent of the piles have been "abated," says Blumenthal.

OUR FAVORITE STORIES



Can you ID these weather phenomena?
Test your knowledge of clouds and much more with our latest quiz.



Why do we feel phantom phone calls?



5 inspired vegetarian sandwiches

ADVERTISEMENT

Did you know...

Trees **lower** air temperature by evaporating water in their **leaves**

Learn more about why sustainable forestry matters



MOST POPULAR ON NOW

1. [50 ways to reuse your garbage](#)
2. [How fluent are you in dog-speak?](#)
3. [13 surprising home remedies for acid reflux](#)
4. [13 natural remedies for the ant invasion](#)
5. [What is a tea sommelier?](#)
6. [What will humans look like in 100,000 years?](#)
7. [What causes tornadoes?](#)
8. [This simple sitting test could predict how long you will live](#)
9. [10 natural cough remedies](#)
10. [A brief history of April Fools' Day](#)

By 2011, we were officially down to 76 million stockpiled tires in the U.S., but nobody really knows the exact number. And some of the biggest piles are truly memorable. The world's largest dump, [Tire Mountain in Weld County, Colorado](#), reportedly had as many as 80 million scrap tires at one time (plus a huge volume of shredded ones). It's supposedly getting cleaned up now (thanks to a fee that state tire buyers pay), but all sorts of financial shenanigans have been alleged.

The big fear with places like Tire Mountain is that [they'll catch fire](#). In 1983, a dump with 7 million tires caught fire in Rhinehart, Va., sending a plume of smoke 3,000 feet in the air (and 50 miles long) into three states. It's now a [Superfund](#) site. Scrap tires are also mosquito breeding grounds, and when they're imported from Japan or China (to make recaps) end up increasing the range of Asian species that carry West Nile and other diseases. Do I have to mention that rats nest in them, too?

But, listen, this is one of the rare environmental success stories. In 2011, 197 million scrap tires were [recycled or repurposed](#), a number that's growing. The [biggest category is tire-derived fuel](#), which accounted for 40 percent of the mix in 2009, but more than 500,000 tons (26.2 percent) became ground rubber and playground walkways, mulch, animal bedding, sports surfacing, molded products and auto parts (such as floor mats). Some is even used in roadmaking as "rubber-enhanced asphalt." If you've been to Phoenix, you've likely ridden around on it. And those workers in the photo above are laying a rubber-enhanced road near Fort Bragg in California.



Find us on Facebook



Mother Nature Network



411,785 people like Mother Nature Network.



 Facebook social plugin

NEWSLETTER

Mother Nature. Delivered.

Daily Weekly

SIGN-UP

JIM MOTAVALLI

New York Times contributor blogs about cars and other interesting ways of getting around.



Recent Posts  **RSS feed**

- [America's tire mountains: 90 percent are gone, thanks to recycling programs](#)
- [Honda Smart Home produces more energy than it uses](#)
- [Fire! Tesla isn't the only company with burning cars](#)

ADVERTISEMENT



Photo: Bridgestone

I was recently in Smyrna, Tenn. (above), where I visited the [world's first LEED Gold-certified Firestone store](#). Managing partner Randy Holden showed off the store's dedicated parking for hybrids, its solar array (providing 12.5 percent of its electricity), its reflective roof, its low-flow fixtures, and its local drought-resistant plants set in a bed of shredded tire mulch. The flexi-pave sidewalk, which was springy to walk on (and is the grey stuff alongside the building), also used a lot of recycled rubber. I love that old tires go into playground equipment, providing soft landings for kids who fall off jungle gyms. The state of Maryland has nine playgrounds that use rubber tires as a building material. The unique tire-recycling playground below was designed by AnneMarie van Splunter for refugee children in Thailand.



The Massachusetts-based [Product Stewardship Institute](#) is working on creative ways to recycle tires. Scott Cassel, PSI's CEO, said that 36 states now collect fees to recycle tires, and Canada also has a program.



EXPLORE
NEW SCIENCE

VIDEOS · JOURNALS · TRENDS

[CLICK HERE](#)



Photo: Bridgestone

Tires are coming out of the environment in many ways. You know how people feel free to dump their used tires in the nearest body of water? Kim Del Castillo, recycling coordinator for Del Rio, Texas (three miles from the Mexican border), helped pull out 802 abandoned tires in a Bridgestone-sponsored event last year, and aims for 1,000 this year.

Jen Holliday of the Chittenden Solid Waste District in Vermont, says the state has 62 known tire piles of more than 100 each — with a cleanup estimated at \$1 million or more. "Without funding, many of the piles will not be cleaned up," she says. "There are limited tire markets in our regions — we don't have in-state tire processing, and very few civil engineering projects." Most of the collected tires become tire-derived fuel, which isn't their highest possible use.

We have good solutions for repurposing tires, they just haven't achieved liftoff yet. Ideally, we'd want to simply turn them back into tires, and Greer Tidwell, director of environmental management at Bridgestone, tells me that's starting to happen, albeit slowly. We're not at slam-dunk stage with old tires, but we're at least rolling down the road.