

Tire-pile up effort rolling along in Va.

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NEW KENT --

Virginia is getting closer to eliminating millions of abandoned tires that for decades accumulated at hundreds of locations across the state. And now many of them are put to better use.

The state has been working since the early 1990s to clean up the tire piles, which have long been a major environmental and health problem because they pose a fire hazard and are breeding grounds for mosquitoes. The old tires can be recycled, with the material used as a landfill cushion, mulch and as a fuel source.

Since 1983, the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality has identified 25 million tires at more than 1,200 locations across the state. About 130 locations, with an estimated 2 million tires, still need to be cleaned up, said Allan Lassiter, the DEQ's Waste Tire Management Program manager. About half of them are in the Richmond area, he said.

"Richmond has always had a big proportion of tire piles," said Lassiter, noting that when people were dumping tires in the 1960s and '70s in the Richmond area, the tires stayed in Virginia, while in other parts of the state such as Northern Virginia, tires could have been transported to sites in Maryland or Washington.

"It is a very big problem," said Lassiter, who has worked on the tire-pile prevention and cleanup effort for 20 years. "It is a problem of the past, but we are still dealing with it now."

At a long-closed auto-repair shop on Golden Wheel Road, off state Route 106 South in

New Kent County, the piles of tires have been slowly disappearing.

Just a few months ago, there were about 200,000 of them scattered across the 25-acre site. They had accumulated there for years. But last week, only a few remained and those would soon be gone, too.

A large piece of equipment would load and deposit them into a shredding machine -- a \$500,000 machine larger than a commercial dump truck. The machine would tear them into pieces. Then they would be hauled to The East End Landfill in eastern Henrico County, where the shredded tires are used in place of gravel as a drainage layer.

"When we started, there were literally piles and piles of tires," Mathew P. Appelget, president of The East End Landfill, said last week as he walked in the nearly emptied muddy lot. The Henrico landfill has been cleaning up the New Kent site as part of a state tire pile cleanup program.

The tires now have a better use, a pleased Appelget said.

They were likely dumped there in the 1960s and '70s, when it was common for people to dump tires anywhere, Lassiter said. Efforts to stop the practice began in the 1980s, after a tire fire in Frederick County burned for nine months and became a 17-year Superfund site, which means it was contaminated by hazardous waste and identified by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency as a candidate for cleanup because it poses a risk to human health and/or the environment. The state began cleaning up tire piles in 1993.

"In the '90s, we had no recycling of tires; none were recycled," Lassiter said, noting as a comparison that the recycling of glass and paper has been around for decades. "Now all are re-used or recycled. Particularly the cleaner tires, there are a lot of uses."

The state can handle about 7 million new waste tires each year. Most of the largest abandoned tire piles have been cleaned up, he said. But the goal is to remove the remaining tire piles and ensure that no new ones emerge.

The program, which started in the 1990s, was funded initially by a tax of 50 cents on

each tire sold, which generated about \$2.5 million a year. The 2003 General Assembly raised the tax to \$1 per tire, effective July 1, 2003 through June 30, 2011, with all extra revenue dedicated to tire pile cleanups.

Currently, two companies have contracts with the DEQ to clean up the piles. A Maryland company is handling the cleanup of about 20 small tire piles in Northern Virginia, and the Henrico landfill is finishing up the New Kent site and starting at a Gloucester County site today. The state pays the company \$100 per ton of the recyclable tires.

Jody LoMenzo, a company spokeswoman, said The East End Landfill removed more 225,000 tires from one of the state's largest tire dumps in Hanover County in 2009. The company's goal is to have recycled a half-million tires in 2010, she said.

"This is a win-win for [The East End Landfill] and a way to reduce the blight on Virginia's landscape," she said.

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