

# Waste Age®

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## Greening Their Fleets

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# Natural Leader

An exotic-game ranch, a line of organic products and a range of philanthropic projects have helped Texas Disposal Systems become an esteemed member of the central and west Texas business communities.

Photos courtesy of Texas Disposal Systems



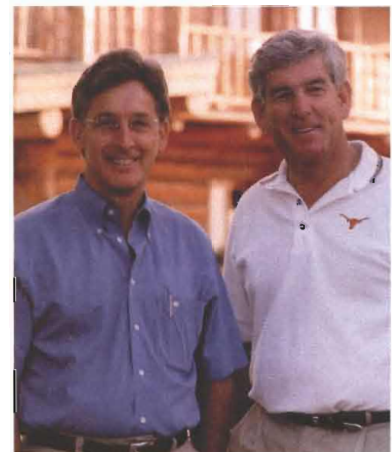
**WILD KINGDOM:** Texas Disposal Systems uses images of its popular exotic-game ranch on its collection vehicles.

By Bailey Webb

**W**HEN IS A LANDFILL more than just a landfill? When it's part of a complex that includes an exotic-game ranch — complete with deer, antelope and zebras — and regularly hosts business leaders and politicians for a variety of fundraisers, such as an annual skeet-shooting event. Situated about 15 miles outside of Austin, Texas, in Creedmoor, the unique landfill and headquarters of Texas Disposal Systems (TDS) have helped the firm carve out a role as a community leader.

Bob Gregory and his brother, Jim, started TDS 30 years ago with one truck and one customer and have built the firm into a fully integrated waste collection and disposal, recycling and organic products company that serves customers in central, south central and west Texas. One of the largest independently owned solid waste collection and disposal firms in the country, TDS now serves more than 100,000 accounts in 25 Texas counties.

Before creating TDS, the Gregorlys were involved in recycling and metals reclamation. Their father was in the



**A FAMILY AFFAIR:** Brothers Bob (left) and Jim Gregory started TDS in the late 1970s.



**ANIMAL ATTRACTION:** TDS' exotic-game ranch draws residents and groups from the surrounding communities.



**COMMUNITY GATHERING:** Organizations in the surrounding area use TDS' pavilion center to hold various fundraising events. Non-profits have free access to the center.

metals business, and, after graduating from the University of Texas, Bob Gregory started a scrap business in 1971 to reclaim metals from electronics. To diversify and hedge against the wild fluctuations in the metal markets, Bob and Jim Gregory started TDS in 1977, incorporating the company in 1978.

"I wanted to start something with more of a local and regional focus that wasn't tied to the whims of international markets," Bob Gregory says. "It doesn't matter what the price of disposal is in China, whereas right now, China drives reclaimed metals and commodities prices." (Note: all quotes attributed to "Gregory" in this article are from Bob Gregory.)

Over the next decade, TDS steadily grew, expanding with commercial front loaders and eventually offering residential service, with recycling always a part of the business. Along the way, as TDS grew, Gregory learned first hand about the ultra-competitive industry. In 2003, a Texas jury ruled that, while the two firms were competing for disposal contracts from Austin and San Antonio in the 1990s, Houston-based Waste Management (WM) defamed TDS when an "action alert" written by one of WM's paid consultants was faxed to govern-

ment officials and environmental activists, questioning the environmental soundness of TDS' landfill.

However, the jury also determined that WM should not pay any monetary damages, allowing both companies to claim victory in the lawsuit. A Texas appeals court is now reviewing the case, which could result in a punitive judgment against WM.

In the end, TDS won service contracts from Austin and San Antonio.

### **Green-Thumb Garbage**

Austin is considered Texas' most liberal community and its most environmentally conscious. Potentially, that climate could create problems for a waste collection firm and landfill operator, but TDS has thrived. Bob and Jim Gregory, as well as TDS Director of Special Projects Dennis Hobbs, all have served in leadership roles with Keep Austin Beautiful and Keep Texas Beautiful.

"You would not realize it's a waste management facility," says Bill Rogers, an Austin attorney, board member and past president of Keep Austin Beautiful of TDS' landfill and headquarters. "They have a reputation in Austin as being particularly environmentally conscious. The environmental con-

## **STAT SHEET**

### **1. Company founded:**

1977 (The company began in November 1977 and was incorporated in January 1978).

### **2. Services and service area:**

Solid waste collection and disposal, recycling, composting, and sale of mulch, compost and gardening products; TDS and its related companies have offices in Austin, Texas; San Antonio; Georgetown, Texas; Alpine, Texas; and surrounding areas, covering central, south central and west Texas.

### **3. Number of customers and breakdown:**

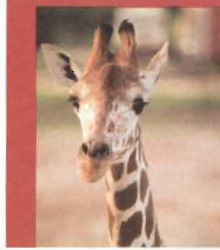
More than 100,000 accounts serviced (residential, commercial, industrial and landfill) as well as thousands of wholesale and retail customers for compost and gardening products. Specific numbers related to customers, sales and profits are proprietary.

### **4. Number of employees:**

Approximately 500

### **5. Equipment used/**

**vendors:** Mack trucks, Ford, Peterbilt, G&H Hoist Mfg., Caterpillar, Columbia Trailer Tippers, John Deere, Scarab, McCloski Brothers, Morbark and Peterson.



**HEADS UP:** A giraffe is one of the many non-native species living on TDS' exotic-game ranch.

sciousness in this community may be a little higher anyway, and they've still maintained that reputation."

Like every other aspect of the TDS business model, the company's envi-

ronmental awareness also leads to a profit center. Operating under the TDS corporate umbrella, Texas Organic Products mixes yard waste with other organic materials and biosolids from wastewater

treatment plants to create a nutrient-rich fertilizer/compost for residential and commercial use. The compost production diverts 77,000 tons of sludge from TDS' landfill annually. Texas Organic Products also markets the Garden-Ville line of compost, soil blends and organic fertilizers, pesticides and herbicides.

With its daily intake of 2,000 to 3,000 tons of waste, TDS' 985-acre landfill yields other treasures. The company's maintenance personnel will salvage reusable items — sporting goods, bicycles, lawn mowers, computers and monitors, furniture and even antiques — and repair them for sale at the Recycling and Resale Center, which the Austin Chronicle has described as the city's "best unadvertised garage sale."

"We're always looking for ways to maximize the value of the waste we collect," Bob Gregory says. "It's consistent with our business model to divert as much as possible from the landfill even though we're in the landfill business."

### **Home on the Landfill Range**

The exotic-game ranch also started out of practicality. For tax purposes, TDS kept cattle on the Creedmoor landfill site. In 1999, the company decided to add exotic animals, which are considered livestock under Texas regulations, and built an events center to host meetings and events for the community, granting non-profits free access to the facility.

From the original 30 animals, TDS now has more than 30 species and thousands of animals, including a giraffe, zebras, bison, gazelle, impalas and a number of deer breeds. The exotic animals are contained by an 8-foot-tall fence whose configuration keeps landfill trash inside the property and keeps wild dogs, coyotes and other unwanted animals out. TDS supports the Exotic Wildlife Association's efforts to repopulate endangered animals' native habitats by breeding them on the ranch and returning them to their homelands, and the animals on



**ANOTHER CHANCE:** TDS' resale center offers reusable items taken from the firm's landfill.

the ranch are not hunted.

Gregory admits that the animals are expensive, but the game preserve is now profitable, too. Animals constantly breed, and TDS exotic animal sales now total more than \$200,000 per year. The animals are a big hit with neighbors, too. "We wanted to do something different. People come out to see the exotic animals and what's new," Gregory says.

With the game preserve and events center, TDS constantly hosts events and tours. It's home to an annual Keep Austin Beautiful skeet-shooting fundraiser that draws business leaders and state and local officials, as well as American Cancer Society events.

With all of those visiting dignitaries and tours, TDS has to prevent odors and maintain a clean site. At the landfill, TDS manages a smaller working face than most facilities of its size, operating a working face equivalent to that of a landfill that handles 800 tons per day, Gregory says, and the clay soil used as working cover eliminates odor. Additionally, TDS operates "citizens convenience stations," where customers can drop off waste at remote-site roll-off boxes without ever coming to the actual landfill.

Gregory says that having political and business leaders visit the ranch and events center for fun and philanthropy is of significant value to his firm. As local governments continue to privatize waste

services and more contracts are re-bid, those pre-existing relationships and a wide network of political and business leaders familiar with TDS' operations and reputation prove to be a strategic advantage. "They see the long-term value," Gregory says. "You do your business right, and the longer you're around, the better it works out for you."

TDS' efforts in relation to its core business and community relations also pay off from a larger economic development perspective, says Warren Ketterman, executive director of the Buda, Texas, Economic Development Board in Hays County, which is adjacent to TDS' home county of Travis County. TDS handles waste for Buda and San Marcos, also in

Hays County. Over the course of his economic development career, Ketterman says he has seen the impact ineffective waste disposal can have on a community and economic development efforts.

"The impact to business can be astronomical," he says. "You don't think about it until you need it. They're an instrumental part of our community."

A second generation of Gregorys has now joined the family business, with both Bob and Jim's children and Bob's son-in-law involved. Their involvement further enables the company to expand as it seeks to replicate its strategy and business model across the Lone Star State.

"We're having more and more opportunities to go outside Austin," Bob Gregory says. "We're marketing our facility and business model. That gives us the opportunity for huge growth. The fact that we offer a diversified level of services helps us because those communities have a lot of different needs. There's a broad area where we can offer a whole package or pieces." **WA**

*Bailey Webb is a contributing writer based in Atlanta.*