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## Turning Trash into Assets

### Austin landfill company was the first to diversify

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Bob Gregory surveys the most active portion of his landfill operation in southeast Travis County, then turns and points to a ranch-style home just across the road.

"See that red brick house?" he says. "Go on over and knock on the front door. Ask the couple who lives there, and they'll tell you—they'll say that we know how to be good neighbors."

Gregory and his brother Jimmy own a high-volume landfill that seldom rests. Day and night, garbage trucks and semitrailer rigs haul in garbage collected from homes and businesses in Austin, San Antonio, and several smaller cities in Central Texas. Trucks rumble down a two-lane road from Interstate 35, hauling 663,800 tons of solid waste a year. The company contracts to handle two-thirds of Austin's solid waste and one-third of San Antonio's. It also operates two transfer stations—in north San Antonio and another in west Travis County—where garbage in transit is consolidated into larger trucks.



After excavating a landfill site, TDS digs a leachate collection trench and lays down rock and gravel. Liquid will drain into the trench and flow to a low point, where it is pumped out for treatment and disposal. / Photo by Texas Disposal Systems

The Gregory brothers challenge visitors to find any evidence of excess dust, blowing litter, or foul odors. The two say their Texas Disposal Systems (TDS) facility demonstrates what a properly run landfill can be. In fact, they believe their fully integrated facility offers a glimpse into the future of solid waste services.



In the next construction phase, shredded tires are dumped and leveled within the collection trench. Used tire chips are a good drainage material, and using them in landfills is a way to recycle this surplus material. /Photo by Texas Disposal Systems

Opened in 1991, TDS was the first in Texas to be permitted by the state to combine a municipal solid waste landfill with a recycling/resale center and composting operation.

Bob Gregory, who also serves as president of the TNRCC's Municipal Solid Waste Management and Resource Recovery Advisory Council, says departing from the traditional role of a landfill owner and operator was key in building support from communities and environmentalists during the long permitting process. A decade ago, landfills routinely prohibited scavenging or salvaging, he recalls, "but I believed there was no good reason to continue burying the stuff.

"We felt it was feasible to divert recyclable and compostable materials from a landfill and create products with value. Then, not only can you sell the products for a profit, but you're financially capable of operating a cleaner landfill and you go a long way toward getting the community to support you," he explains.

The Gregorys added to their pioneering reputation by building a conference center on their property and, as a bonus to the community and visitors, creating a ranch with 1,600 head of native and exotic animals. Today the landfill roster of 38 employees includes a full-time ranch supervisor with veterinarian experience who tends to the collection of native longhorns and free-roaming zebra, antelope, gazelle, and exotic sheep and goats.

## Good Neighbor Policy

Visitors to the TDS landfill don't see many of the inside activities until they approach the entrance. Blocking much of the view are high berms and tall trees—a technique called "site-screening." TDS workers patrol FM 1327 several times a day to pick up debris blown from trucks; a street sweeper stands ready to clean the road

of mud and litter. Fronting part of the property are mesh litter fences that stand 30 feet tall to prevent debris inside from reaching the road.

Just inside the main gates, trucks are weighed—landfills charge for garbage disposal by the load, ton, or cubic yard—before taking a long circular drive to the unloading area. The working area of the landfill is surprisingly small—about half an acre. Containing the size helps to minimize dust, odor, and wind-blown debris and the attraction to rodents and birds.

The constant movement and straining sounds of heavy equipment are reminiscent of a construction site. The hydraulic lifts of trailer tippers raise semitrailers high in the air to empty the

contents. Compactors rapidly move in to spread the garbage, then use their steel wheels to crush hundreds of plastic garbage bags. Operators strive for a 3-to-1 compaction ratio—squeezing three cubic yards of trash into one cubic yard of space—and earn a bonus if they do better.

About 2,000 tons of solid waste is compacted each day to a depth of 10 feet and, in keeping with state regulations, is covered with six inches of clay or soil.



The TDS landfill receives about 2,000 tons of solid waste each day, mostly from Austin and San Antonio. The hydraulic lifts on trailer tippers raise semitrailers high in the air to empty the contents. These long trailers transport a volume equal to three or four garbage trucks. / Photo by Texas Disposal Systems

## One-Stop Shopping

Only one-third of the 990-acre TDS site is devoted to landfilling; activities elsewhere on the property include recycling, composting, and ranching.

At a citizens drop-off center, customers pull in with trailers and pickup trucks full of garbage. Employees help unload the throwaways, all the while looking for salvageable goods. Usable items like tricycles, outdoor grills, and garden tools are pulled and assigned to the TDS "garage sale," which is well attended every day. Unusable goods go to a different location for recycling or a trip to the landfill. Appliances are drained of freon and become part of the 4,400 tons of scrap metal sold each year.

TDS accepts other recyclable materials, such as used oil, plastic, aluminum, newspaper, and steel. Used tires are sent to a processor for making tire chips.

In the composting section, rows of 8-foot-high earthen mounds known as windrows send up steam, a sign that the organic materials inside are decomposing and soon will be ready for sale as premium-grade compost or topsoil blends.

Brush cleared from construction sites, which might otherwise end up in landfills, is sent to the composting piles along with yard waste. Other composting ingredients that might surprise weekend gardeners include food waste from a women's prison, hundreds of thousands of telephone books, and federal income tax returns that were shredded and composted by TDS under a contract with a federal agency.

The compost windrows are turned regularly and moistened with surplus liquids, one being 8,000 gallons of "wash water" received from a local milk producer. The liquid, which comes from cleaning out fat-free milk production tanks, is a product that the city of Austin does not want in its wastewater treatment plants but TDS is glad to take. The fat from the milk feeds bacteria that feed on the yard waste.

Discarded soft drink, beer, and wine also work to hasten decomposition.



Compost is loaded into a trommel, which screens the material to a fine consistency. As part of its combined operations, TDS sells the decayed organic matter to landscapers and gardeners to fertilize and condition the soil. / Photo by Tommy Hultgren

TDS sells mulch, compost, and topsoil blends to homebuilders and landscapers needing to build up the rocky landscapes of Central Texas. TDS also sells the organic soils and gardening products through a chain of stores it owns in the Austin-San Antonio areas. Composting represents 10 percent of the company's annual income.

Several years ago, the Gregory brothers decided to diversify further and build a guest conference center with two log cabins and a large pavilion—facilities used by companies and nonprofit groups for meetings, business retreats, and fund-raising events.

The Gregorys also began stocking their rural countryside with cattle and deer, then branched into exotic animals.

The unusual collection of 28 wildlife species serves as an unexpected conclusion to TDS tours, especially as the company's safari bus glides by buffalo chomping on grass, zebra guarding a shade tree, and young antelope playing on a hillside.



This African antelope, the Greater Kudu, now calls Central Texas home, along with 1,600 free-roaming exotic and native animals at the TDS property. The spiral horns on the Kudu males average 48 inches in length. /Photo by Texas Disposal Systems

More than one guest has commented it was the last thing they ever expected to see at a landfill.

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