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Texas landfill's denizens wild, woolly, exotic

By Jim Johnson

CREEDMOOR, TEXAS — Wild-beests and waste. Gazelles and garbage. Red Deer and rubbish.

An Austin, Texas, area landfill is combining exotic animals and community involvement as a way to build goodwill for its solid waste operations.

Call it longhorn steer and a landfill for Texas Disposal Systems Inc., which runs an exotic game ranch on the company's 1,240-acre disposal site in Creedmoor.

To hear co-owner Bob Gregory explain the ranch, it's not all

that unusual to have 30 different species of animals — some endangered — roaming in land adjacent to the company's working landfill.

This is Texas, after all.

The creation of the exotic game ranch with its 2,000 animals about six years ago grew out of a combination of practicality and neighborliness, Gregory explained.

"It's real simple," he said. "We have supported community efforts for many years in Austin and the central Texas area. We needed to show ourselves to be different than our competitors,

and the best way to do it is to have people out. Because to most people a dump is a dump, and they will never believe what you say until you show them."

Texas Disposal Systems has many guests visit the site.

Using the exotic animals as well as indoor and outdoor pavilions large enough to host more than 1,000 guests at a time, the company opens up its facilities to nonprofit organizations throughout the year. Those groups use the attraction for fund-raisers or recognition programs.

Visitors typically come away impressed by what they see, Gregory said.

"They come to a landfill and they see something they didn't expect to see," Gregory said. "It looks nice. It looks attractive. It's well-maintained."

Constructing a community-friendly meeting place — which includes two smaller log-cabin style buildings for more intimate functions — also eliminated a problem common to many landfills: opposition.

Texas Disposal Systems has been able to use the ranch and its amenities to take the air out of those who once tried to find fault with the company. Opposition lawsuits — which were never successful, the owner pointed out — have disappeared over the years.

Instead of paying lawyers to battle in court, the company can now funnel money toward community outreach.

We thought, 'You know what, let's try it.' The neighbors may like the idea of animals there. It was such a huge hit with the neighbors and the community that we started adding more animals.

Bob Gregory
Texas Disposal Inc.

Co-owner and brother Jimmy Gregory sees countless people come through the landfill and pavilion and cherishes the connection with the community, especially with those who are less fortunate than his family.



ARE YOU TALKIN' TO ME? A buffalo stands guard at the Texas Disposal Systems Inc. landfill in Creedmoor, Texas.



STILL LIFE: A gazelle takes five during its daily gambol to pose for a photo at the Texas Disposal Systems landfill.

He recounts a recent outing with the Big Brothers Big Sisters of America organization, remembering how his eyes welled up as he watch members of the group leave after an evening of fun at the ranch.

"Getting to make a difference in somebody's life is what it's all about," he said. "I know that God had something special for our lives. I really believe that the pavilion area that we have in our life fulfills that.

"Giving back makes a big difference," Jimmy Gregory said.

Free use of the pavilion and staff is by invitation only. That way the company can keep control of how the site is used.

Texas Disposal Systems expects to host about 150 events this year, and fund-raisers held at the landfill can raise between \$10,000 and \$250,000, Bob Gregory said.

The pavilion is directly downwind from the landfill's working face, but odor is not a prob-

lem.

Bob Gregory noted that people who have dinner directly downwind from the landfill on the site "go away with the picture that we want them to have, and that is reality."

"You really bring people into your house and show them how you live," he said.

Texas Disposal Systems keeps its landfill's working face as small as possible in an effort to keep odors to a minimum. That also dissuades birds from hanging around because there is little exposed trash to munch on.

"You don't see a facility like this," Jimmy Gregory said. "The landfill doesn't stink. We don't have blown paper at the landfill. We decided years ago we were going to run an exemplary site."

Visitors to the pavilion and exotic game areas often take bus tours of the landfill to get a greater sense of how the company operates.

"It's about as far apart as you can get," Jimmy Gregory said. "But we found that the goodwill and the PR we get out of doing both is phenomenal."

The creation of the exotic game ranch has some rather logical roots.

The permitted landfill, on 341 acres of the site, has grown over the years as neighboring properties became buffer areas.

The agricultural land had old livestock fences that needed replacing for litter control, so the brothers started looking at 8-foot-tall fences used at other exotic animal ranches in Texas.

Those fences, which feature small openings on the bottom to keep out predators and large openings toward the top, serve well to trap litter that gets blown from the landfill, Bob

Gregory said.

Researching the fencing gave the brothers the exotic game idea.

"In Texas, we have a lot of what we call high-fence ranches," Bob Gregory said. "And these high-fence ranches have exotic animals. That's the reason they're high-fenced, to keep the animals from jumping out. So we build 8-foot-high fence around our site and throughout our site to separate pastures and areas, and it's great for litter control."

Building a chain-link fence would have been an effective litter barrier but would have sent the wrong message to the community, he said.

"Instead of doing a chain link

hit with the neighbors and the community that we started adding more animals."

And in doing so, the landfill has seen interest soar over the years.

"The key was to make it friendly and receptive," Bob Gregory said. "Back then, we would have maybe a few hundred people a year for tours through our facility. Now we have over 10,000 people a year who come through our facility for tours and events."

While the site attracts attention from the public around Texas, those in the solid waste business travel much farther to check out the emu and zebras.

"It is without question a destination location for solid waste



WHAT COMES NATURALLY: A pair of zebras laze and graze in the lush greenery at Texas Disposal Systems landfill near Austin.

fence that would look like an industrial site or something that we were trying to keep people out of the facility, I wanted to do something that would catch litter equally well but it would look a lot more friendly," Bob Gregory said.

And with the fence in place, the brothers decided to start adding animals.

"We thought, 'You know what, let's try it,'" Bob Gregory said. "The neighbors may like it. They may like the idea of animals there. It was such a huge

facilities from around the world." Bob Gregory said. "Underlying all of it is the public recognition that we get, that we do things for the community, that a corporation that is generally known to be in a rough business can be a very much of an asset for the community." ■

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