

Where Do Old Cars Go?

Recycling cars yields raw materials for new vehicles and other consumer products.

While you may think recycling is mainly for plastic bottles and newspapers, cars are actually the world's most recycled consumer product. A whopping 95 percent of each year's retired vehicles are recycled. In the U.S., that breaks down to 26 autos every minute.

- At least 84 percent of each auto is recycled, including floor mats, plastics, upholstery and carpet. New tires contain 10 percent recycled rubber; and in 2004 alone, the industry recycled 14.5 million tons of steel.

- New vehicles also use many other recycled materials, including plastic milk jugs turned into auto trim, carpet used as sound-deadening materials, and fabric processed into insulation.

- Auto recycling annually saves about 85 million barrels of oil, which would have been used to manufacture new or replacement parts.



Illustration by Mike Kasun

Today, the initial stop for old vehicles is the "auto recycler." Many of these businesses, which no longer use the term "junkyard," are clean, computerized operations that follow stringent government regulations.

Recyclers help preserve natural resources, cut pollution, reduce demand on landfills and lower insurance costs. That's because insurers write off fewer damaged vehicles as complete losses.

- Removing all fluids — oil, gas, transmission, brake, etc. — batteries, mercury switches and air bags.
- Removing standard reusable parts, which are tested, cleaned, rebuilt — if necessary — bar-coded and entered on a computer.
- Removing specific parts in response to requests from auto repair operations, collectors and the public.

When the good parts have been salvaged, tires and gas tanks are removed and the vehicles are crushed and trucked to facilities for shredding.

Shredders with hammers break crushed cars into baseball-sized pieces called "frag." This is sorted by metal type, then melted and mixed with new metals and sold to other companies for re-use. The residue, called "fluff," is put into a landfill because no recycling schemes have yet proven feasible.

- Fluids — Most auto recyclers burn oil and grease for heat. If not, oil recyclers buy the product and sell it to industrial plants for fuel.
- Tires — Governments have mandated quicker tire recycling to limit fires and insect breeding sites, so auto recyclers pay tire recyclers to take old tires. The rubber becomes supplemental fuel for power plants or is sold to make other products. The steel belts are put in a landfill.

Beware Of Flood-Damaged Cars

Last year's hurricanes and floods damaged more than 570,000 vehicles, according to George Eliades, executive vice president of the Automotive Recyclers Association. "Many of those cars spent three weeks under 20 feet of water, so there's not a millimeter that wasn't touched by saltwater," he says, "and you can't reverse the impact of corrosion."

As a result, the vehicles are not road-worthy. But instead of being recycled, they're being sold to unsuspecting buyers as far away as California and Alberta, Canada, Eliades says.

To avoid buying a flood-damaged vehicle:

- Order a vehicle history report from a service such as CarFax.
- Check the spare-tire well for standing water.
- Be leery if a car smells musty or moldy or has a strong deodorizer smell.
- Be suspicious of used vehicles with brand-new carpet or upholstery.
- Look for grit, dirt or rust on components under the hood.