

## Columnists

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Originally published August 12, 2011 at 10:00 PM | Page modified August 12, 2011 at 10:21 PM

EcoConsumer

### Take our used mattresses, please

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

We expect to recycle everything these days, but some products don't make it easy. Take mattresses, please.

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Although progress has been made recently on mattress recycling, they remain one of the most challenging items for consumers to recycle. We don't need to get rid of a mattress very often, but when we're done with it, we usually want it gone in a hurry.

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**Q:** Let's cut to the chase. What am I supposed to do with an old mattress?

**A:** The easiest solution is to ask a retailer to take back your old mattress and box spring when you buy a new set. Many retailers provide that service, although they may charge a small additional fee.

Tell the retailer you want your old mattress recycled, not landfilled. Mattress stores and other businesses that generate lots of old mattresses, such as hotels, can now recycle mattresses more easily than in the past through a Washington State Correctional Industries project and other programs.

**Q:** What if I have an old mattress to get rid of, but I'm not buying a new one from a retailer?

**A:** That's currently the black hole of mattress recycling, especially if the mattress is in poor condition. Only a few local businesses will pick up or accept your mattress and get it recycled, and you could pay as much as \$60 for recycling, usually significantly more than you would pay to throw it away.

**Q:** What would happen if I just leave it on a street corner somewhere?

**A:** Dumping mattresses and other items illegally can result in hefty fines from local governments or the state. If a mattress gets dumped illegally on your property, it's generally your responsibility to have it hauled away.

**Q:** How about if I have a mattress I don't want that's still in good shape?

**A:** Some charities may accept it. For listings of charities and businesses that resell, donate, recycle or dispose of mattresses, consult King County's "What Do I Do With?" website at [your.kingcounty.gov/solidwaste/wdidw](http://your.kingcounty.gov/solidwaste/wdidw). Under "Select a Category," click on Furniture, then

Mattresses.

You could also offer it on Craigslist ([craigslist.org](http://craigslist.org)) or Freecycle ([freecycle.org](http://freecycle.org)). Before you offer a mattress for reuse, just make sure it doesn't have any stains or rips, and of course, no bedbugs

**Q:** The bedbug scare has made used mattresses less appealing, hasn't it?

**A:** Yes, but reputable used-furniture dealers will usually check mattresses they sell to make sure they do not have any telltale signs of bedbugs, and most individuals will not knowingly sell or donate a used mattress with bedbugs.

**Q:** Why are mattresses so hard to recycle?

**A:** A standard mattress and box spring are made of polyurethane foam, steel, wood, cotton and other fabric. Some of those materials have value for recycling if they can be separated cleanly, but that's the hard part.

Mattress-recycling workers typically "fillet" the mattresses by hand, using box-cutters or similar tools. Because it is such time-consuming work, mattress-recycling operations may use prison labor or subsidized developmentally disabled workers to make it cost-effective.

**Q:** Can't we just landfill mattresses?

**A:** Landfills don't want mattresses because they take up a lot of space, and the springs pop out and get tangled in the landfill equipment.

**Q:** What's the solution?

**A:** A "product stewardship" approach, where the mattress industry takes responsibility for providing recycling, would make proper mattress disposal easier for the public and reduce costs for governments. This might involve incorporating an "advance recycling fee" into the price consumers pay for a new mattress.

It also helps the environment when we buy high-quality mattresses, which last longer, and mattresses made from greener materials such as organic cotton.

Individuals, businesses and governments all need to pay more attention to the final disposition of bulky products such as mattresses and carpets that we spend so much time on every day. So let's sleep on that tonight.

*Tom Watson is project manager for King County's Recycling and Environmental Services. Reach him at [tom.watson@kingcounty.gov](mailto:tom.watson@kingcounty.gov), 206-296-4481 or [www.KCecoconsumer.com](http://www.KCecoconsumer.com)*