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## EcoConsumer

# Thinking of sending a mattress to a landfill? Sleep on it

**By Tom Watson**

*Special to The Seattle Times*

Here's something to sleep on tonight: In just one day at a local landfill, more than 300 old mattresses and box springs arrive for burial. If you laid them out end-to-end, they would stretch more than a third of a mile. And that's just from one day.



Kristopher Lee / The Seattle Times

Why should you care? Because, as sleepers, we all contribute to this disposal problem.

Old mattresses don't go away easily. Mattresses are bulky, generally not reusable, and difficult to recycle. Even putting them in a landfill doesn't work well.

But there are solutions, and that's where you come in.

## The final resting place

Since most retailers will take your old mattress when you buy a new one, retailers haul truckloads of mattresses directly to King County's Cedar Hills Landfill in Maple Valley. The mattresses also come to the landfill from King County's solid waste transfer stations, brought in by residents and businesses.

Landfill equipment operators hate mattresses. Driving giant bulldozer-type machines, their goal is to pack the garbage down tightly before it is covered. But mattresses don't compact well. Even worse, the mattress springs pop out and get tangled in the equipment, often damaging it. Cedar Hills Landfill operations supervisor Dean Voelker calls this "a huge problem."

Because mattresses are so difficult to handle, landfills around the nation have increased the fees they charge to accept mattresses, especially in large quantities. King County will soon begin classifying

bulk loads of mattresses as "special waste," which is charged a higher fee.

## **Dreams of recycling**

Even the adage "Reduce, reuse, recycle" doesn't really apply to mattresses. It's hard to reduce the quantities of mattresses being used and disposed of, although if more people coupled up, I guess that would help.

And most people have no interest in buying a used mattress. Retailers do donate some lightly-used mattresses to charities, but most charities do not accept old mattresses from the public.

That leaves recycling. Manufacturers construct mattresses very tightly so they won't come apart easily, which is great, until you try to recycle them. To separate the components for recycling, mattresses can be "filleted" (an actual industry term) manually with a box-cutter, which takes a fair amount of time and energy. Or they can be shredded, which requires expensive equipment.

A standard mattress and box spring consist primarily of steel, polyurethane foam, cotton and other fabric, and wood. Good recycling markets usually exist for the steel, and markets could also likely be found for the foam. Because of the condition of the fabric and wood that comes out of old mattresses and box springs, those materials currently have few reliable markets.

The value of the recycled materials alone will not cover the costs of mattress recycling. However, mattress recycling may make sense financially as an alternative to landfills, if you take into account the true costs of landfilling, according to a report by the International Sleep Products Association's Mattress Disposal Task Force.

A few mattress recycling operations have started up in recent years in Massachusetts, Minnesota and the San Francisco Bay Area. But the task force report and other industry-supported research suggest that mattress recycling will not flourish until a funding mechanism is developed.

## **What you can do**

When local governments have to spend more money to deal with mattresses than other types of garbage, we all pay for those extra costs. So what can we, as consumers, do to help solve the mattress disposal problem, and to reduce the environmental impacts of mattresses?

- **Support industry and government actions to address the disposal issue.** If these efforts someday result in a small "advance recycling fee" when you buy a mattress — a system used for other problem items such as tires and car batteries — think of it as money well spent.
- In the meantime, when you buy a new mattress, **consider mattresses made with fewer petroleum products and toxic chemicals.** It's always good to use less of those, and keep them out of the landfill.

Search online for "green mattresses" or "organic mattresses."

- **Extend the life of your mattress by maintaining it well.** Many manufacturers and retailers recommend that you rotate and flip a new mattress every two weeks for the first six months, then every three months after that. Don't bend a new mattress or jump on it, and never allow a mattress to get wet.

You'll sleep better knowing that you're taking care of your mattress, and the planet.

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