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Stewardship limits carpeting in landfills

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By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

Recycling happens at the intersection of science, economics and environmental protection. Each type of product must be recycled differently, which makes recycling fascinating but also frustrating.

One of the greatest recycling challenges lies right under our feet. Carpet doesn't go away easily. Most old carpet ends up in landfills, rolled up like big, heavy, ragged logs.

Nearly 3 percent of all waste disposed of in Washington state is carpeting, with 50,000 tons of carpet and carpet pads dumped in landfills every year from King County alone. Statewide, only 2 percent of carpet gets recycled.

Q: That seems pretty pathetic. Why is the recycling rate so low?

A: This is where the science and economics come in. Most carpet is made primarily of petroleum-based plastic such as nylon or

polypropylene. Plastic is technically recyclable, but different types of plastic generally need to be handled separately for recycling to succeed. Because of the costs of separating and processing different carpet materials, recycling usually isn't viable without some added financial support.

Q: As a consumer, why should I even care about carpet disposal?

A: Carpet dumped in landfills takes up a huge amount of space, shortening the life of landfills and increasing the costs of waste management for governments and taxpayers. Recycling carpet instead of landfilling it also saves energy and reduces greenhouse gas emissions.

Q: What's the solution?

A: Many governments and environmental groups want the carpet industry to take more responsibility for increasing the carpet-recycling rate, as part of a growing trend known as product stewardship.

In 2002, the carpet industry signed an agreement with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and 21 states including Washington, pledging to greatly increase carpet recycling. Under this agreement, the industry formed the nonprofit Carpet America Recovery Effort (CARE) program (www.carpetrecovery.org). CARE aims to boost the carpet-recycling rate to more than 20 percent and also divert carpet from landfills through reuse and by burning it for fuel.

Q: Are the voluntary industry recycling efforts enough?

A: Some governments want better and faster results. Five months ago, California approved the nation's first carpet product-stewardship legislation. Under this law, the industry will be required to dedicate 5 cents per square yard of all carpet sold to pay for recycling and other alternatives to landfilling. This amount will be shown on a carpet purchaser's receipt in California beginning this July.

A carpet-product stewardship bill introduced in the 2011 state Senate, SB 5110, did not advance but is expected to be considered again next year. The bill did not include specifics on fees but would have required the industry to set up state-regulated recycling programs.

Q: What can I do as an individual to reduce carpet waste?

A: When buying a new carpet and arranging installation, make it clear you would like your old carpet to be recycled rather than landfilled. It's important for carpet retailers to know customers care about recycling. Several new recycling alternatives are now being developed to serve Seattle-area carpet dealers.

If disposing of carpet or carpet pads yourself, check King County's "What Do I Do With ... ?" website (your.kingcounty.gov/solidwaste/wdidw). Only a few carpet-recycling options now exist for the public. However, old carpet pads made of polyurethane foam have more value for recycling, and some recyclers may accept those at no charge or even pay a small price for them.

You can also reduce waste by purchasing carpeting made from recycled materials. Several manufacturers including Mohawk, Shaw and Interface use reclaimed materials such as recycled plastic pop bottles in some of their carpet lines.

Carpet tiles are greener than wall-to-wall carpet, since you can easily replace worn or stained areas, rather than getting a whole new carpet. Because carpets are dust magnets, using hardwood floors instead of carpet in at least a few rooms can improve your indoor air quality.

Next time you buy a carpet, just imagine how it might look after you replace it: Rolled up and tattered, surrounded by garbage. There's got to be a better way.

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