

Linda Engle: Sustainable Idaho on KISU is brought to you by the Portneuf Resource Council.

Charlie Medema: Welcome back to Sustainable Idaho. I'm your host, Charlie Medema. This week I had the privilege of speaking with Craig Hunter, the president of Tire Reclaim, a dedicated tire reclamation organization with multiple facilities across the state of Idaho, including multiple right here in the Portneuf Valley.

CM: Tire Reclaim is the first ever dedicated tire recycling organization in the state of Idaho. What has the journey to this point looked like for you and your team?

Craig Hunter: Well, I should go back a little bit. So because the tire recycling as a whole, as a company, a standalone company started as an undercompany or a sister company of United Metals Recycling based out of Caldwell since 1972. So it's very, you know, a lot of heritage in this company. And Tire Reclaim kind of came as a small offshoot to help manage the tires that are generated from a metals recycling company.

CH: So they crush cars, for example, they do things like that where they get a lot of metal that's brought in and tires are attached. So they found themselves with a lot of tires to manage. And what we've done is made that no longer an issue for the metals company.

CH: And then with that, the equipment that we were buying to manage that, we realized that other folks in the market were interested in recycling tires as well, not just United Metals Recycling. So as that got busier and busier, then we realized that this is we got something here where we might have a business opportunity. So Tire Reclaim became its own entity, still under the United Metals Recycling umbrella, but started paying its own bills, hiring its own employees.

CH: And since then, we've been able to grow to well over 2 million tires in the state of Idaho, as you said, the only tire company, full circle, what I like to call it. So we collect the tires, we process the tires into multiple products. And then we sell those products all over the United States.

CM: In a 2024 systematic review of research concerned with the environmental impact of discarded tires, conducted by the EPA, researchers concluded that over 800 million are disposed of globally every single year, and approximately 3 billion are produced. Improperly discarded tires can pose health risks for wildlife and humans, as well as pollute and obstruct waterways. What were some of your environmental motivations with this project and your organization's wider mission?

CH: Yeah, so now you're getting into the why, honestly, for myself, my business partner, and what I like to instill in most of our employees to understand that it's important to have a why. And the why for me is that I literally just went archery elk hunting right outside of where you're at, outside of Downey, Idaho, which is not very far from where you're at. And where we camp, fish, hunt, take our children, take our families, we don't want to see tires in those areas for lots of different reasons, right?

CH: You mentioned waterways, but even just public land dumping, illegal dumping, you know, there's always going to be bad actors. And a lot of folks don't know that pests are a big common nuisance that come with tires, like you just see a tire pile. Well, you can almost guarantee there's snakes, there's mice, and more importantly, there's mosquitoes. So one tire can generate 10,000 mosquito larvae. So if you have a large, you know, a very wet area with lots of tires, you are going to have a mosquito issue.

CH: And that's actually why we see different areas, they have mosquito abatement dollars that are set aside for tire cleanups. And they'll actually do free tire cleanups in some of the communities of Idaho. You just got to keep an eye out for what your local government is doing. But we have seen that in the state of Idaho. And I think that's a great idea. You know, it is a big part of why I swing my legs out of bed in the morning is just knowing that we're giving people a safe place to take tires.

CM: One of the most interesting aspects of your organization is the creation of multiple different products and resources from these discarded tires, including the creation of tire derived energy. Can you describe some of these outlets of tire reclaim?

CH: Yeah, and honestly, that's pretty much my role is finding outlets all the time. So as president, it's important for me to know what materials we have, where they can be sold, where they can be placed, and tires never stop, basically.

CH: So the way it was described to me when I first got started is that tires are like water. Once you start the flow, you can't really stop the flow, it's got to go somewhere you can manage it and you can direct it. But once you tell people that you're receiving tires, well, here they come.

CH: So it's very vital to our business to be able to have these products moving out all the time. So one I mentioned, which is kind of the crown jewel is the tire crumb, what we call crumb rubber, which that is, like I said, BB sized. We use it in the football field application. It's also a big component to molding, which this is the next thing that tire reclaim is super excited about. And right there by you off our Thorn Road in Pocatello is our new molding facility. So we have two press molds that will, in essence, they're just giant machines that squeeze the rubber into what we call horse trailer mats or trailer mats.

CH: You've seen them at Cal Ranch, you've seen them at different places, and they're just a black rubber mat sitting on a pallet outside. And you can go in and tell them whether you want a four by eight sheet or four by six sheet and you load them up. And there's actually quite a bit of rubber in each one of those mats, and those are sold on the retail level.

CH: And dairies, farms, even people right at home or in the back of your pickup, they get used a lot. So this is something that we're pretty proud of here, is going that next step to create a full circle, closed loop system to where we collect the tires, we process them, we mold them into a product, and then we sell them right back to the people who are generating the tires. And some of the other products are what we call tire derived aggregate.

CH: So the tire derived aggregate is a one-to-one replacement of gravel of all sizes. So we can actually cut the rubber into pieces, what we call a tire chip, and that's used for multiple applications. And these are all United States government certified products to be used in the ground.

CH: And this is something that's a renewable source of, you know, having the aggregate replacing gravel one-to-one means that we can go in, and if you have a freeway embankment being built, you can do a lot of the backfilling on the concrete walls. You can use tire rubber. It actually drains and keeps the water away from the walls. There's a lot of different opportunities, and that's something that we're really trying to get the word out on through civil engineering and getting in front of the right people to explain how these aggregates work. A second part of that is the actual road itself.

CH: So the aggregate can be used in the base of building the road, but then we can also build the asphalt out of rubber. And it's a small percentage of the rubber that goes into the asphalt, but when the state of Idaho uses two million, I think it's two million tons of asphalt every year, then just even a minute amount of rubber in all of those tons actually equates to a large amount of tire rubber. That material makes the roads last almost twice as long.

CH: They actually reduce the cost, and they reduce the rutting and cracking. So that's another avenue that we're really excited about.

CM: Thank you so much to Craig Hunter for telling us about Tire Reclaim's mission and some of their projects within tire recycling. In two weeks, we will revisit my discussion with Craig to discuss more of his organization's programs and involvement in tackling Idaho's discarded tires. If you would like to learn more about Tire Reclaim and how you can properly dispose of the tires in your possession, go to TireReclaim.com and KISU.org slash Sustainable Idaho.

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