

SUSTAINABILITY IN VERSATILITY

NICHE MARKETS BOOST GROUND RUBBER SALES

MARKETS for ground rubber that have been suffering from overproduction and low prices are getting major league help from niche applications, reports Michael Blumenthal, executive director of the Scrap Tire Management Council. Three years ago, for example, only modest amounts of tire chips were being used as septic tank leach pads. Today, in a major turnaround, 90 percent of septic tank installations in the southeastern United States use rubber chips for soil absorption purposes.

"Tons of the stuff are being applied in states like Alabama, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina and Florida," observes Blumenthal. "There are three good reasons: The supply of stone is not there, so tire chips can cost \$300 less per job. It's easier to work with tire chips than stones, and chips hold more water. With new homes being constructed in suburban/rural areas, tens of thousands of septic tanks are being installed every year. We're excited about this niche market."

The South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control has prepared standards for using tire chips as aggregate in septic tank absorption systems. Jana White of the Department sends this information about the requirements: Chips may not be smaller than one-half inch nor larger than four inches in size; Wire strands may not protrude more than one-half inch from the sides of the chips; When used in an absorption system, at least 90 percent of the chips must meet the technical specifications listed above; Fines are prohibited since they can contribute to clogging or blocking of infiltrative surfaces; and Absorption trenches must be covered with geotextile (synthetic) fabric prior to backfilling to keep soil from infiltrating through the aggregate.

PLAYGROUND COVER, SOIL AMENDMENTS AND RUNNING TRACKS

While large quantities of scrap tires are used as fuel for power plants and cement kilns, nonburn alternatives continue to build. Bigger markets are growing for larger sized ground rubber, points out Blumen-

Nonburn options for turning tires into such uses as aggregate in septic tank absorption systems and protective cover on playgrounds are steadily increasing.

thal. "Many companies that produce bigger than mesh size (3/8th inch plus) tell us their supply can't keep up with demand." The rubber chips are used for playground cover, soil amendments and running tracks. "They are the safest thing a kid can fall on," he sums up, "even though cats don't like tire chips, which isn't necessarily a bad thing."

In California, the state's Integrated Waste Management Board (CIWMB) established a Local Public Agency Waste Tire Playground Cover and Track Surfacing program last year. Along with ground preparation and installation of new surfaces, funds can be used for the material costs of rubberized mats and running tracks made with California used tire rubber. "These local grants (totaling over \$1 million) will put tons of old tires to use in environmentally friendly and publicly beneficial projects that are cost-effective and long lasting — something every city, county and school budget administrator can appreciate," says Dan Eaton, former CIWMB chairman.

IMPACT OF FIRESTONE TIRE RECALL

The recall by Bridgestone/Firestone Inc. — following the tragic series of vehicle accidents — amounted to 6.5 million tires. That quantity added about 2.5 percent to the 270 million tires discarded annually in the U.S. Recalled tires were reported to be transported to a permitted recycling or disposal facility after replacement at a Firestone service center. The tires seemed to be following the pattern that leads to roughly 70 percent aftermarket use and 30 percent to landfills. A spokesperson for Ford said his company and Firestone were working on a plan to increase demand for recycled rubber and hoped "to have something in place by fall."

Some companies that manufacture tire recycling equipment such as shredders said last month that the recall has not overwhelmed their customers. "Although the recall makes people aware of how important recycling tires is," notes Charles Astafan, general manager of Columbus-McKinnon tire shredders, "it will have more impact regionally on processors/recyclers. Some areas may not feel it at all, whereas others will have to add shifts to process all the tires." ■