

Recycling gives Christmas trees a second life

By Kathryn Reed

With the holidays officially over, it's time to restore the house to pre-holiday décor. This means out goes the tree.

South Tahoe Refuse has been recycling Christmas trees since 1992. In 2007, it hit the 100,000 mark for the number of trees that had been repurposed.

Even though people have cut back on spending in many areas of their lives, based on the constant number of trees STR recycles each year, the recession has not affected the Christmas tree industry – at least on the South Shore.



Christmas trees at South Tahoe Refuse are ready to be turned into mulch. Photo/LTN

It used to be that garbage crews would collect the trees and take them to a South Lake Tahoe facility for them to be chipped. The city would then use the material at various locations.

Now the refuse company sends them to Full Circle Compost and

Bentley Agrowdynamics in the Carson Valley.

With the opening of STR's Resource Recovery Center in April 2010, the trees can be sent through a chipper on site. A little bit of the matter is kept at STR in case a construction project might need the material for erosion control purposes.

STR has increased its green waste recycling by 73 percent since the recovery center opened. John Marchini, who runs the garbage company, said this far exceeds expectations.

Trees are starting to trickle into the South Lake Tahoe facility from homes throughout the South Shore. STR folks believe the abundance of snow has kept people from discarding their tree immediately after Christmas. STR will send a special truck on regular routes for the first two weeks in January to pick up trees. They need to be 6-feet or shorter, or cut into pieces – and absolutely no decorations on it.

A small pile of trees sits in a corner. Marchini reaches down to pick off a piece of tinsel.

"The No. 1 problem in composts is plastic," Marchini tells *Lake Tahoe News*.

That shiny silver decoration is made from plastic.

People can also drop the trees off for free at the recovery center. This includes commercial businesses that might have a tree that is larger than the average tree found in a home.

While these trees are clearly a seasonal occurrence, the recycling of them helps STR meet the state mandate of keeping at least 50 percent of garbage out of landfills. South Tahoe Refuse has a 66 percent diversion rate. But that state regulation in 2020 changes to 75 percent.

"Food waste will come into play to meet that mandate," Marchini said.

Right now STR is not licensed to recycle food waste. The program it has with a few restaurants on the South Shore requires a truck to pick up the food waste and take it directly to Full Circle Compost.

“Craig (Whitt who runs Full Circle) has indicated to us he can take everything we have,” Marchini said.

But some issues still need to be worked out before food waste would be the norm here. For one, there is limited space in Tahoe to put bins to collect the product. The other is to ensure people understand what food products can be recycled. If it gets contaminated, the entity doing the contaminating is charged.

And right now, recycling food and turning it into compost is two to three times more expensive than dumping it in the landfill. That is one of the deterrents for people with food waste – the cost involved can be prohibitive.

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Other tree recycling programs:

- Tahoe Truckee Sierra Disposal has curbside tree recycling Jan. 14-18. Clean, undecorated trees cut in 3-foot segments should be placed by trash.
- Tahoe Truckee Sierra Disposal customers may drop off trees anytime through Jan. 18 at Glenshire Clubhouse, Tahoe Donner Clubhouse, Truckee Rodeo Grounds and the high school soccer fields. Trees must be undecorated. Place them in the bins provided.
- Incline Village-Crystal Bay residents may place clean trees curbside on their standard service day between Jan. 7- 11 for recycling collection conducted by Waste Management. Trees may be whole up to 6 feet.
- Incline Village General Improvement District's Waste Not

Program has partnered with the North Lake Tahoe Fire Protection District to offer free Christmas tree chipping Jan. 7-11.