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Modesto company goes green with junked automobiles

By John Holland

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Amid all the wreckage lies hope for the planet.

So say people in the business of dismantling old cars and trucks. They claim to recycle most of the steel and other materials and to capture the motor oil and other hazardous waste.

And they say their efforts deserve as much recognition today, the 42nd annual Earth Day, as any business that calls itself green.

"We've tried to clean up," said Lou Israels of Modesto. His company, California Auto Parts on South Ninth Street, has been taking vehicles apart since 1941. "We don't want this junkyard attitude."

The industry has long had a rough-and-tumble image — rows of rusted vehicles stripped of their still-useful parts, waiting to be crushed and shipped off to steel processors. The yards tend to be in the poorer parts of cities, such as South Ninth and Crows Landing Road near Modesto's southern border with Ceres.

But industry people say they operate under heavy regulation aimed at preventing pollution, blight and trafficking in stolen parts. They are licensed by the California Department of Motor Vehicles, which tracks titles and other records, and inspected by other state and local agencies.

"When you take in a car, there's a proper way of dismantling it," said Israels, who has worked since 1962 at the company, founded by his parents, Richard and Pauline Israels.

The industry has taken to calling it "end-of-life" treatment, sounding a little like providers of hospice care for people.

Here's how it works:

- The yard obtains an old or wrecked vehicle from one of several sources, such as an auction, insurance companies or an individual.
- The battery, fluids and mercury-containing light switches are removed and turned over to certified handlers.
- The vehicle is inspected to determine which parts — engine, radiator, fenders, taillights and so on — are worth salvaging for resale.
- The remaining metal hulk is compacted by a crusher and sent off to a recycler.

About 80 percent of a vehicles's materials find new uses, industry people say. That's a better recycling rate than aluminum cans (51 percent) and glass containers (31 percent), according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

"It's amazing what's recycled in a car — the oil, the tires, the mercury switches, the upholstery, the wires," said Mark Farriester, third-generation owner of Farriester Auto Wreckers on Crows Landing Road.

The yards might seem messy, but they are highly organized. The parts are inventoried by make, model and year so they can be retrieved quickly when a repair shop or other customer needs something.

The average vehicle takes about four hours to dismantle, said David Torres, who works for Israels. He spoke from under a 2000 Toyota 4Runner, clad in grimy coveralls and clutching a socket wrench as he worked to loosen the transmission.

Despite the labor cost, the yards sell the parts for as much as 80 percent off the price of new parts.



(Debbie Noda/dnoda@modbee.com) - David Torres dismantles a Jeep (4-20-11) for recycling the parts at California Auto Parts. - -

"It's a tremendous savings, and they're recycling," said Ron Williams, manager at California Auto Parts.

Farriester was founded by Walter Farriester in the late 1940s, and its parts inventory is even older.

"We have a huge street-rod clientele," Mark Farriester said. "We go back to the '30s with our cars."

Auto scrap yards have been around almost as long as autos. They helped people survive the Great Depression. They supplied some of the metal and rubber that went into planes and tanks in World War II.

The concern about keeping fluids and batteries from polluting the land came later.

"It wasn't that they didn't care," Israels said. "They didn't know about it."

A decade ago, an environmental group called Sustainable Conservation started working with the state's dismantlers. It helped create educational materials on mercury switch handling, storm runoff management and other topics.

"I think it's really a model for how we solve a lot of environmental problems," said Kathy Viatella, managing director of programs at the San Francisco-based group.

The industry has changed also to deal with the decreased steel content in cars in favor of plastics and other alternatives. This has reduced the severity of crash injuries — the crumpling fenders absorb much of the impact — but the plastics can be trickier to recycle.

Metal is still the biggest chunk of the business, prompting another problem — theft by people looking to sell it at recycling centers.

Upstanding wreckers also have to deal with competition from unlicensed yards that do not bother with the expense of pollution controls and other measures.

The rogue outfits sometimes operate "chop shops," dismantling stolen vehicles and selling the parts, DMV spokesman Armando Botello said.

Israels said that despite the challenges, it's a worthwhile business to be in. His slogan: "We sell the best and scrap the rest."

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