Calling all cars:
A comprehensive approach to used oil recycling

by David Stitzel and Tom Spille

One city looks at the big picture of used oil recycling, and ends up with a program that combines collection, education and market development.

Polluted waters . . . Contaminated land . . . Exposure to noxious chemicals.

The problems associated with the improper disposal of used motor oil are well known and well documented, but what can one individual city do? In the past, municipalities with used oil recycling focused solely on the collection part of the recycling loop. Now, the Closed Loop Oil Recycling Education Program in the City of Bellevue, Washington is changing the way its citizens change and recycle their oil, and at the same time, it's stimulating local markets for re-refined oil (1).

Begun in the autumn of 1993, CLOREP is designed to foster the private-sector collection of used motor oil from do-it-yourself (DIY) oil changers and to develop retail and fleet markets for re-refined motor oil.

Bellevue, the state of Washington’s fourth largest city, has a population of over 100,000. Each year, the city generates about 100,000 gallons of uncaptured DIY used motor oil, according to estimates by the Washington State Department of Ecology.

To divert this potential toxic river from entering storm drains that flow directly into Bellevue’s many streams and lakes, the project team established the following tasks:

- Increase the number of used oil collection sites for DIY oil changers.
- Provide public education regarding oil, appropriate disposal of used oil and the value of re-refined motor oil.
- Increase the number of public and private vehicle fleets using re-refined oil.
- Increase the retail availability of re-refined motor oil.

Several advantages are gained by incorporating collection, education and market development efforts under a single program. First, private-sector participants are provided broader opportunities to take part in the program. For example, if the program focused exclusively on collection efforts and a potential business participant did not wish to serve as a collection site, there would be no further option to engage the business in the program. Within CLOREP, such a site could choose instead to sell re-refined oil and take part in public education activities. This flexibility has made project recruitment activities more successful and less frustrating.

Additionally, CLOREP’s multi-faceted approach allows clearer communication of the critical “Close the Loop” message. The recycle/reprocess/buy recycled nexus must be conveyed and understood if businesses and the public are to play a role in making all aspects of recycling economically viable.

CLOREP’s intent is to convert oil recycling from a supply-side activity — collecting oil first and finding a market second — to a demand-side model — where the value of used oil markets pulls collection.

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consumer use and availability of re-refined oil should increase the demand for used motor oil. And an increase in the value of used motor oil should encourage the private sector to provide more DIY collection opportunities.

Collection sites for DIYers
Without an appropriate used oil collection infrastructure in place, no other program element can be responsibly implemented. Disposal opportunity for used DIY oil is a constant need, and will only expand as a result of the awareness raised by CLOREP’s education and market development activities.

At present, Washington State Department of Ecology regulations require approximately one DIY used oil collection site for every 10,000 population, resulting in a requirement of 10 sites for Bellevue. CLOREP has helped increase the number of collection sites from six to 11 and promotes all 11 sites. All sites are sponsored by the private sector and receive no financial assistance from the city. These sites include auto parts stores, gas stations, quick lube shops and automotive repair shops.

In recruiting potential sites, project staff identified likely candidates based on business type, location and program fit. Program fit looks at questions such as, “Would the business be motivated to participate by publicity?” and “Could a synergistic relationship be created that incorporates other program components such as education, re-refined oil sales, fleet conversion, etc.?”

Once staff identified a potential site, a meeting was arranged with the store manager. The manager was provided with written information covering the advantages and responsibilities of becoming a CLOREP collection site. Staff emphasized that becoming a collection site would increase foot traffic to the facility and would likely increase sales.

In particular, staff referred to the Chief Auto Parts/First Recovery study, which demonstrates that used oil collection sites can realize significant marginal sales of retail goods to customers who came to the store only to drop off oil and decided while on site to purchase an item. Although the average marginal sale was lower than the average sale to a customer who came specifically to make a purchase, the sale — at $13 per customer — was still significant and resulted in projected marginal profits for the year of $1,920.

Site managers were also apprised of current state laws and regulations that govern used oil issues. The collection site recruiter highlighted three state regulations in particular:

- Retailers selling more than 1,000 gallons of oil or 500 oil filters per year are required to post the location of the nearest oil collection site. Rather than advertise a competitor’s used oil collection service, retailers are thus encouraged to collect oil at their facility.

- For approved collection sites, the state offers a contaminated DIY oil reimbursement fund (2). The fund was established to pay for the hazardous waste hauling and disposal of any incidentally contaminated, though properly collected and registered, DIY used oil.

- The state established a DIY used oil collection goal of 80 percent by 1996. CLOREP staff informed businesses that if
of re-refined oil discusses in-store outreach activities.)

The “cure” component focuses on the DIYer and the oil buying public. This audience buys and changes its own oil, and is the most likely to buy quarts of virgin motor oil and to dispose oil improperly. CLOREP is careful to assure that oil recycling and buy recycled messages are positive, encouraging and informative rather than blaming and punitive.

Outreach through auto parts stores is the most likely way to reach this audience. For this reason, staff developed “Please Recycle Your Oil” and “Please Buy Re-refined Oil” shelf hangers, which are provided to retailers to be hung on shelves containing quarts of oil. The recycling piece tells the reader how to find the nearest used oil collection site.

Program brochures are stocked at tool rental outlets, tire shop waiting rooms and other locales likely to cater to DIYers. Among other information, the brochure offers oil waste reduction tips. Suggestions include using wrenches for and replacing leaking gaskets, buying oil in one-gallon containers rather than quarts, and considering synthetic motor oil and reusable oil filters (3).

Fleet use of re-refined oil
CLOREP staff have worked with several fleets in switching to re-refined oil and in promoting the use of re-refined oil. Fleets currently participating in CLOREP include the City of Bellevue, Baby Diaper Service, Key Bank, Eastside Disposal, Cascade Pest Control and Larry’s Markets.

Many of these companies operate outside the city of Bellevue as well, and are using re-refined oil across the company fleet. Larry’s Markets, a local grocery chain, is of particular interest, in that it also offers re-refined oil for sale on its store shelves. The retail display is accompanied by a full-color poster proudly announcing that Larry’s uses re-refined oil in its highly visible fleet of catering vans.

In recruiting potential fleets willing to switch to re-refined motor oil, project staff utilized a three-pronged approach (4). The three prongs are executive, fleet manager and public relations, and apply to both the public and the private sectors.

The “executive” approach is a top-down strategy where the emphasis is placed on convincing high-level decisionmakers of the importance of using re-refined oil. The “fleet manager” approach hinges on winning the confidence of the fleet administrator or shop manager. The “public relations” approach involves selling the consumer relations or related department on the promotional and marketing benefits of switching to re-refined oil. These approaches may be used singly or joint-
ly and should be selected based on each unique fleet situation.

Regardless of the approach taken, a few points were stressed with regard to fleet use of re-refined oil:

- Re-refined oil has the full approval of the American Petroleum Institute and its use will not void engine or vehicle manufacturer warranties, despite claims to the contrary.
- Many public and private fleets are already using re-refined oil, quite possibly including their competition. (In Germany, for example, Mercedes-Benz factory-fills new autos with re-refined oil.)
- Re-refined oil is available through many local oil distributors, including such well-known names as Chevron and UNOCAL.
- A local vehicle maintenance company will come on site to take care of corporate fleets, and will use re-refined lubricants when changing the oil.
- If the company is reluctant to use re-refined lubricating oil, re-refined hydraulic oil is also available and may provide a more suitable entry point for using petroleum products with recycled content.
- Publicity is available through CLOREP to promote the company as an upstanding, environmentally concerned corporate citizen.

As an additional perquisite for program participation, CLOREP provides bumper stickers that proclaim, “Follow My Lead, USE RE-REFINED OIL, Call 1-800-RECYCLE.” The stickers are available to participating vehicle fleets, the general public, school children (for their parents’ cars) and any retail stores that carry re-refined oil.

**Availability of re-refined oil**

Before CLOREP, the project consultant worked with businesses in Washington State to make re-refined motor oil available at the retail level. As a partial result of that work, three businesses began offering re-refined oil in quart bottles. These three businesses have locations in Bellevue and have worked since CLOREP began to educate the public about re-refined oil and increase its acceptance and use.

The three retail outlets selling re-refined oil are Al’s Auto Supply, a large auto parts store chain; Larry’s Markets, a regional full service, upscale grocery store chain; and the Puget Consumers Co-op, a natural foods supermarket chain. Each of these businesses carries re-refined oil at all its stores in Washington. Each store has allowed CLOREP staff to provide in-store education to customers.

The staff, in-store outreach consists of a continuously running video (produced locally by Key Bank and featuring Cliff — John Ratzenberger — from the TV show “Cheers” and the voices of The Tappet Brothers from National Public Radio’s “Car Talk”), a standing display highlighting the closed oil loop, and bottles of oil at various stages in their manufacture. Available educational materials note where DIY oil can be recycled, which companies are using re-refined oil in their fleets and where re-refined oil can be purchased.

The intent of in-store outreach is to provide a place where consumers can learn more about re-refined oil and have questions and concerns addressed directly by professional staff not affiliated with the sponsoring store or the manufacturer of the oil. One tool which has proven useful in attracting customers to engage in conversation is the use of a raffle. Both grocers offering re-refined oil have made cases of oil available as a raffle prize. By offering a chance to sign up for the oil, CLOREP staff have been able to engage customers long enough to let them know how many local fleets are using re-refined oil, how reasonably priced it is, how it conserves natural resources, etc.

At the last outreach before this article was written, behavioral changes were apparent:

- There was a dramatic increase in customers asking specifically where they could take their used motor oil. Most seemed quite pleased when presented with the list of 11 Bellevue sites.
Footnotes
(1) CLOREP is funded by the Washington State Department of Ecology’s recycling grants and the Local Hazardous Waste Management Plan in King County.

(2) Contamination of DIY used oil collection sites by hazardous substances, such as brake cleaner and solvents, was less than 2 percent for self-serve drop-off sites statewide in 1994. The percentage was even lower for staff-assisted sites such as those used in Bellevue.

(3) In 1995, DIYers will also be encouraged to switch to quick lube service. CLOREP hopes to distribute a discount coupon at existing DIY collection sites, which would be good for a reduced rate re-refined oil change at participating quick lube facilities. Quick lube shops themselves will also be targeted in 1995 to develop quick lube re-refined oil options. Co-promotional opportunities with grocers, local water bottlers and others will be sought to highlight the program. CLOREP staff have already confirmed with several oil change providers that they will use re-refined oil if customers bring it in.

(4) This same approach was developed and used with success in a project funded by the Washington Department of Trade and Economic Development and Clean Washington Center, which was managed by the current CLOREP consultant (see “Redefining re-refining,” in the September 1993 issue).

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