

# THE “GREEN” THING TO DO

With 5 billion pounds of carpet waste crowding landfills each year, clearly recycling carpet is the right thing to do. | **Fran Guinan**



Fran Guinan, Sales & Marketing Manager, CTS Flooring

**D**o you remember when you were a kid there was this riddle, “What weighs more —1,000 lbs of lead or 1,000 lbs of feathers?” I always wondered how many feathers it would take to make 1,000 lbs. I figured it

was enough to fill my house or maybe even my whole backyard. So what does that have to do carpet recycling? That’s what comes to my mind when I try to fathom the 5 billion pounds of carpet that go into landfills every year. How much space could that possibly take up?

In the retail industry, thousands of yards of carpet are replaced annually as stores are remodeled to maintain the brand’s image with its customers. And just about all of it ends up in a landfill. I think we are all in a position to help divert some of this waste carpet to other areas. As with most new ideas, we may have good intentions initially but as to whether or not we execute the plan, ultimately it comes down to cost and hiring a company that has the expertise to incorporate a reclamation project on a national basis.

## CAN IT BE DONE?

The answer to the simple question, “Can we recycle carpet?” is yes. Carpet recycling is something that can be done today. The more complex question is, “At what cost?” Unlike taking carpet to existing dumps or landfills that collect all different types of waste materials, there is limited infrastructure for collecting and recycling carpet. Certain regions of the country are more advanced than others in the ability to recycle but there is no real true national solution. There are a few manufacturers who will, if you are installing their products, arrange to pick up your waste carpet and take it back to their recycling plants. But once you move outside of those products it is up to you to get the carpet where it needs to go to be recycled.

## PROCESS

Remove the carpet from your store as you would with any replacement or remodel. But to dispose of this waste carpet, you have to divert it from the local dump to a recycle center. While it is increasing daily, there are roughly 50 centers around the country plus a few manufacturers who will accept old carpet for recycling. They don’t all accept the same carpet however. So identifying the carpet installed in each store and the nearest recycle center that will accept it will be added to your list of tasks to complete your remodel. Once the carpet is ripped up, next you have

to get it there. As mentioned earlier some manufacturers will pick up your carpet, but only if you are installing theirs. Otherwise, some form of shipping needs to be arranged to transport the waste goods to the recycle center.

## LIMITATIONS

The biggest limitation to recycling your carpet is the fiber type. The two predominant fibers on the floor today are nylon 6 and nylon 6.6. Nylon 6 is accepted by a major manufacturer and is the easiest type to recycle. This is because the manufacturer can buy it back from the recycle centers that gather it, break it down and use the raw material to create new fiber and, therefore, new carpet. This is referred to as a “cradle to cradle” process. Therefore, just about every recycle center that handles carpet accepts nylon 6. By comparison, Nylon 6.6 is not so easily broken down and thus is only handled by a very few recycle centers and manufacturers. In order to identify the nylon type, recycle centers that specify nylon 6 only will require that you provide a sample of the carpet to be recycled before they will accept it. They should have the testing equipment at their facility identify the nylon type. If your carpet is accepted, then it must be delivered to the recycle center free of other construction debris. There may or may not be a charge to accept this material, depending on the recycle center.

## SHIPPING

The next major obstacle in recycling carpet is shipping and handling. How do you get the newly removed product from the jobsite to the recycle center or manufacturer that will accept it possibly hundreds of miles away? The most obvious answer is to consolidate your waste carpet in a container on a jobsite or at an installation shop and have it picked up once the container is full. In our typical line of work (retail stores), this is not feasible. The jobs are taking place overnight and many are in mall locations with no room or time to accommodate an extra container for a few days. In many cases the carpet will need to be shipped directly to the recycle center or manufacturer as each job is completed. This is the most direct process but it can be the most expensive, paying for freight on an individual job basis rather than consolidating a number of shipments. Consolidating the waste carpet presents another problem as well. The waste carpet may differ from job to job. This would require that the carpet be separated before it is shipped back to the recycle center, adding another layer of complexity and coordination.

## DOCUMENTATION

Once the carpet is received at the recycle center, it is cut and baled and then shipped back to a manufacturer or a processing plant where it is broken down and used to make other products. You will want to receive documentation from the recycle center as to where your waste carpet was redirected.

There is no question that recycling carpet is the right thing to do. Whether or not you are able to do the right thing will depend on how it impacts your bottom line.

The process described above is still evolving and will hopefully someday become second nature when it comes to replacing carpet. National flooring vendors and manufacturers who have taken the lead on developing these processes will make this possible.

So what weighs more — the cost of recycling carpet or the cost of landfills large enough to handle 5 billion pounds of carpet a year? **PRSM**

FRAN GUINAN IS A SALES AND MARKETING MANAGER FOR CTS FLOORING. CTS FLOORING IS A NATIONAL FLOORING CONTRACTOR AND SUPPLIER THAT SPECIALIZES IN REFRESH PROGRAMS FOR RETAIL STORES.