

Recycled trash hits the road

August 13,2001

By Jason Geary

staff writer

ST. LUCIE COUNTY Not all roadside trash has to be an eyesore. Some can even help save lives.

Using recycling technology, manufacturers are reincarnating trash into useful materials for highway construction.

Since the early 1990s, the Florida Department of Transportation has been using recyclable plastics for a variety of uses, including fences, posts, rest-stop benches, barricades and fender systems for bridges.

One such product is even allowing guardrails that old safety standby to do their part to conserve the environment. Instead of wood, a guardrail's "offset block" can be made completely of recyclable plastic.

Bryson Products, Inc. a distributor of highway safety products has supplied 1,000 of its "RE-BLOCKS" for a construction project taking place on a stretch of Interstate 95 in St. Lucie County.

Chad Heimbecker, a spokesman for Bryson Products, said the blocks are created in a Mississippi plant with a combination of high-density plastic waste from consumer and industrial sources.

The company estimates that if one of these 14-pound blocks were made completely of sport bottles it would require approximately 250 bottles.

"It's a good way to get some stuff out of the landfills," Heimbecker said.

The re-paving project runs from Okeechobee Road north to Indian River County and encompasses approximately 11 miles, according to engineering officials.

During its final touches, plastic blocks will be installed, but don't expect garbage guardrails to completely line this stretch of highway.

"It's not that we are going to replace them with plastic just for the sake of replacing them," said Joe Borello, the project's design manager. "All the design materials perform differently, so we don't like to mix them in a guardrail."

When a considerable number of wooden blocks require replacing, plastic blocks would be substituted, Borello said.

In general, many recyclable materials are becoming more common on construction projects, Borello said.

Standards now call for old asphalt to be shaved off and mixed with new materials, he said. Recycled bits of rubber are also added into the top layer. Contractors additionally have the option to use other recyclable materials.

"There are a lot of recyclable products out there, but a lot of them are extremely expensive in relation to other products," Borello said. "When it's a close call, we always expect the use of recyclable products."

Richard Powers, a highway engineer with the Federal Highway Administration, said the plastic offset blocks perform equal to wooden blocks. Both help guardrails to contain and redirect vehicles from dangerous areas.

"The advantage of plastic is they tend to last longer, and the disadvantage is they tend to cost more," Powers said.

RE-BLOCKS do tend to be more expensive, Heimbecker said. An average wood block may run between \$2 and \$4, and a RE-BLOCK can cost \$3 to \$5.

However, Heimbecker said the chemically treated plastic has greater durability to environmental conditions. The estimated life span of a RE-BLOCK is 30 years, which compensates for the initial cost.

In some cases, wooden blocks have been replaced after five to 10 years, he said. Wooden blocks have also been known to shrink and crack in as little as a year especially in regions like Florida with its intense ultraviolet radiation.

August 12,2001