

## Tire dump could be redeveloped as solar farm

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THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH



FILE PHOTO

In August 1999, smoke from the fire at Kirby Tire Recycling in Sycamore could be seen in Columbus, 70 miles away. More than 7 million tires burned over five days. Another 23 million tires were removed from the site.



A fire at Kirby Recycling Inc. burned for five days in 1999 and took nine years to clean up. The tire fire by the numbers:

**23 million**

Undamaged tires shredded and removed. COST: \$13.9 million

**7 million**

Burned tires removed  
COST: \$10.9 million, including removal of contaminated soil

**20.4 million**

Gallons of polluted water treated  
COST: \$7.3 million

Note: Number of tires are estimates based on typical passenger-car tires

Source: Ohio Environmental Protection Agency

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A proposal to build a solar farm on the site of a former toxic tire dump has the makings of a green future that few could have predicted.

Little of the 136-acre Kirby Recycling dump that burned out of control for five days in 1999 in Wyandot County remains except for \$65.4 million in unpaid environmental fines and cleanup costs.

But that might be OK with the state.

Officials say the prospect of a solar farm at Kirby is so tantalizing that the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency might be willing to forgo all but a fraction of what it is owed.

"We like the idea of what they want to do," said Dina Pierce, an Ohio EPA spokeswoman. "We were not ever going to see that money, to be perfectly frank."

Kirby Tire Recycling Inc. no longer exists, and its former owners, Don and Rebecca Williams, could not be reached for comment.

Eric Romich, director of the Wyandot County Office of Economic Development, said the offer presented to the owners would have them give up the property in exchange for dropping the liens filed against it. It's not clear if they've accepted the offer, but Romich said officials have been granted access to the land.

State development officials also have approved a \$165,900 grant to perform an environmental assessment on the property. It's part of an official cleanup process in which the Ohio EPA would legally declare the 136 acres safe for development.

The August 1999 fire spread through 14 acres and burned the equivalent of 7 million tires over five days. It created a plume of dense, toxic smoke that was visible 70 miles away in Columbus. Oil and toxic compounds that dripped from the burning tires killed more than 10,000 fish in nearby Sycamore Creek.

The fire spurred lawmakers to double the 50-cent fee the state charges for new-tire purchases to pay for the cleanup, which was completed in 2008.

Who would put the solar field in? Possibly New Jersey-based utility Public Service Enterprise Group, which built an 80-acre solar farm near the Wyandot County Airport last year. It generates enough electricity to power 9,000 homes.

The group is listed as a party to a Jan. 6 memorandum of understanding signed by Wyandot and Ohio EPA officials. The memo spells out the terms under which the property could be turned into a solar farm, including giving the Public Service Enterprise Group access to the land to do a study.

Curt Judy, manager of development for PSEG Solar Source, would say only that the company is looking at opportunities in Ohio.

Romich said if the assessment finds that hazardous pollutants still linger in the soil, more cleanup money would have to be found.

It's also not clear which entity would buy the site or the amount of money that would go to pay off its liens. The memorandum suggests a \$203,310 sale price, which would completely pay tax debts to the county and state and pay off a \$45,700 bank lien. The Ohio EPA would get \$104,628, less than a penny on the dollar for the \$64.4million owed the state.

Pierce said the project would create jobs, and the business would provide property-tax revenue. It also would be a big victory for the state's scrap-tire program, which faces a 56 percent spending cut in the governor's budget.

The \$2.8 million that the program will spend next year should be enough to cover cleanups at 70 small illegal tire dumps statewide, Pierce said. Unlike Kirby, where crews removed and recycled more than 23 million tires, most of the other dumps have fewer than 2,000 tires.

"One of the examples is a boarded-up house in Hamilton County and the backyard has about 500 tires," Pierce said.

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