

Junk car problem turns serious as Maui loses way to dump them

Scrap metal dealers and recycling firms are full of abandoned cars and no longer can take them, leaving Maui a potential junk heap in the making. "Time to take action."

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Only one place on Maui is currently accepting dead cars: Maui Tow & Transport, located at the Central Maui Baseyard, 2000 Mokulele Highway, Lot 220. For now, despite dwindling space, according to John Demello, one of the company's drivers, Maui Tow will accept, at no charge, properly documented junk cars under the County's Derelict and Abandoned Vehicle Abatement Program. "Properly documented" means that the person delivering the vehicle must show ownership title and registration in their name, as well as a driver's license or other photo ID. If the vehicle is 20 years old or older, unregistered but still owned by the original registrant, a "certificate of junk" can be obtained from the county. That piece of paper, plus photo ID will get the vehicle into Maui Tow. From there, the vehicles are taken to a temporary storage area for processing. They could be there a long, long time.

Maui Scrap Metal and its associated business, Metal Recycling of Maui, have been the island's leading processors of cars, trucks, appliances, and other large metal items for years. Located on Waiko Road, the companies, run by Lawrence Koki and Roger Apana, have kept the grinders and balers going, trying to keep up with the demand. It hasn't been easy. Maui's shredded, baled metal is shipped to O'ahu's Hawaii Metal Recycling (HMR) where it joins shipments from Kaua'i and the Big Island to make enough of a container-load to sell to foreign markets. That's the key. We don't produce enough on our own here on Maui. It's only when all the islands join forces that the private recycling companies on O'ahu can make a profit. But they have problems too. The biggest glitch happened in the fall of 2002 when the HMR equipment failed. Immediately all shipments from the neighbor islands stopped. You can still see the result: ditches, fields, and roadsides lined with dead cars.

Hawaii Metal Recycling is back up and running, but they're in the 'catch-up' stage, dealing with the mountains of vehicles that accumulated just on O'ahu while the company was down.

Meantime, our own Maui Scrap Metal has been cited by the State of Hawai'i Department of Health for various infractions of their permit, including storing junk vehicles on property outside their permitted baseyard. Until they clean up the overflow they cannot accept more vehicles. For years, MSM has fought tax liens and litter citations; this latest blow has come at a time when they—and Maui—can least afford it.

The one company that has all the permits required to accept and process junk cars is Maui Auto

Wrecking. Unfortunately, their baseyard is full to overflowing and they can't take additional vehicles.

On the other side of the situation is the fact that dumping a car—or any other trash for that matter—is illegal. The law provides for significant penalties, particularly when the roadside trash is an automobile.

In the case of vehicles, when the registered owner can be determined through the license or other means, a notice is sent, describing, among other things, “intended disposition of the vehicle if not repossessed within ten days after the mailing of the notice.” Disposition can mean public auction, or disposal as junk if the appraised value is less than \$250. A registered owner who wants the car back must pay the costs of towing, handling, storage, appraisal, advertising, and other expenses incurred by the county.

It would seem a simple matter to trace the ID numbers on the chassis or engine block of a car that is unclaimed, vandalized, stripped, and dumped, to find the owner, write a ticket, and collect fines and costs. Not so. As pointed out above, many of these derelicts are unregistered. Some have had ID numbers removed. Some are stolen, modified, and later abandoned. Traces often lead to people who are long-gone from Maui, or who legitimately sold their vehicle to someone who failed to register it, or who reported it stolen, or who simply disclaim ownership.

So the problem is two-fold. The first hurdle is summed up by John Harder, division chief of Maui County's Public Works and Environmental Management department. “There is no one capable of processing [junk] cars on Maui right now.” The cars can be tagged, towed, hauled, and stored, but they can't be stripped of environmentally dangerous materials or recycled into profitable pieces.

And the second stumbling block is that, although it's illegal to dump those vehicles in cane fields, ditches, and along public roadways—a solution some decide is their only real choice—it's often impossible to trace the real owner and recover the costs. So, the county has no choice but to haul abandoned vehicles to temporary storage, make the taxpayer cover the costs, and hope that someone, somewhere will step forward with a plan to take care of Maui's derelict and abandoned vehicles once and for all.

As the number of unsightly dead-car dumps increases, and the amount of noxious fluids seeping into the ground gets to a hazardous stage, and the objections voiced by our tourists get louder, and the letters to the editor get more frequent, perhaps there's a point at which our residents will no longer accept the status quo.

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