Contractor moves fluidly from excavation to organics recycling, with services ranging from land clearing and contract grinding to soil remediation and wood products marketing.

**EXCAVATOR SPAWNS SUCCESSFUL WOOD RECYCLING BUSINESS**

At age 14, Dave Zwicky decided he wanted to be in the excavating business. Backed by a banker and a co-signer, he bought his first piece of equipment, a backhoe, and never looked back. After 30-plus years in business, Zwicky shifted his company’s focus to organics recycling and land clearing. Once again, his energy and creativity created a successful enterprise, one that last year processed and sold nearly 700,000 cubic yards (cy) of material.

Zwicky is president of W.D. Zwicky & Sons, Inc. the parent company of Zwicky Processing and Recycling, Inc. (ZPR), based in Robesonia, Pennsylvania. When he decided to expand his contracting business to organics recycling in 1988, he drew on his family’s heritage of mechanics and toolmaking to convert some of his excavating equipment for recycling work. The earliest recycling contracts were for stump grinding, first for an area farmer and then for a local contractor. “We did those jobs and then another job after that, and we kept going and going. And it really just grew out of there,” he recalls.

Because processing stumps with modified excavating equipment was difficult, he purchased a stump grinder (all of the grinders the company owns are manufactured by Morbark). That was the first piece of equipment in what is now a highly mobile fleet. The company’s front-line reduction machines include five grinders that are in constant use — usually at sites miles apart — along with support crews and equipment. For example, at a campus expansion project for Elizabethtown College in southeast Pennsylvania, one grinder fed by an excavator quickly reduces trees cleared from the ten-acre site. Meanwhile, a grapple skidder places and pushes trees and scrub material within reach of the loader, and a nearby open-top trailer quickly fills with clean chips from the grinder’s discharge conveyor. “We help the college on an ongoing basis to recycle its organics, all of which they reuse on site,” Zwicky says. Another grinder is in use several miles to the east, processing a stockpile of old pallets and wood growing frames from a nearby mushroom producer. Zwicky’s son, Chris, has worked for the organics recycling company since the age of nine, and his experience shows as he operates an excavator equipped with a grapple to keep the horizontal grinder fed from the pile of lumber.

One of ZPR’s crews is dedicated to stump grinding on the company’s land clearing jobs. Operators have learned how to do the job efficiently. “We split stumps first with an excavator fitted with a Rockland stump splitter, primarily to get the rocks and the dirt out of them,” Zwicky explains. “Some contractors don’t think so, but we’ve proved to ourselves that we get a more efficient grind with four pieces of stump than with one massive stump. Splitting the stump cleans it out and gives you a more economical grind.”
The large number of customers for which ZPR provides custom grinding requires tight scheduling of the company’s equipment and crews. “In addition to our bigger jobs, we usually have at least one crew out doing smaller custom grinding jobs for somebody,” Zwicky says. “One of the reasons we bought another smaller horizontal grinder is because it’s very mobile and doesn’t require permits to move around.”

A MULTITUDE OF PRODUCTS AND CUSTOMERS

The 700,000 cy of material sold by ZPR last year included 14 different products, all made from recycled organics, that cover the spectrum of landscaping applications, soil amendments, and agricultural and specialty products. “Landscaping mulch is our primary product,” explains Zwicky. “We produce several grades of mulches, including some colored materials, although most are natural color.” The company sells to a growing base of nearly 500 wholesale accounts. “We keep our blends of materials constant and work really hard to keep repeat customers, our bread-and-butter people,” he adds. You can give a guy a load of junk one time, but he’s not going to be there next year to pay your bills. Quick money isn’t good money.”

Three-quarters of the 700,000 cy sold are wholesaled directly from job sites. The remainder of the products are sold from the company’s 42-acre site on the former family farm near Robesonia or from the company’s new 114-acre expansion site in Evansville, several miles away. There are sorted piles of material in various stages of processing, from grinding and chipping through screening and coloring. Several large static composting piles containing leaves, grass, brush, yard trimmings and wood residuals are turned with excavators. They are inoculated periodically. The finished product is typically used in blends.

Product development is ongoing at the site. “Two new products are going to be made 100 percent from recycled demolition material which is all going into the landfill now,” Zwicky explains. “Another is actually made of recycled pressed board, plywood and cardboard, again, all currently going into the landfill.” He also is developing materials for erosion control. Products include compost and mulch filter berms and materials for bank stabilization. “We make custom-blended products depending on what the erosion control needs are using mulch, compost, soil and other materials,” he says. Increasingly, landclearing and recycling accounts include a growing number of high-tech site remediation and recovery projects, including some Superfund jobs. The services include treating contaminated wood residuals and bulk reduction of materials on-site.

MAINTAINING SUSTAINABILITY

Because the road to his success was paved by support from others, Zwicky has been helping others get established in an organics recycling business. “We’ve franchised a couple of outlets, gotten them started,” he says. “We started some of these younger landscapers who seemed to have good potential and a desire to grow. We help them push the paperwork through and get established, and do the physical setup of their facility for them and even end up bankrolling a lot of that activity.”

A windmill on Zwicky’s property not only blends in with nearby Amish farmsteads, it also pumps water from a pond used for both an emergency supply of water and as a retention pond. At both his original location and at the expansion site, Zwicky is careful to minimize the operations’ impact on the environment and his neighbors. “All the runoff is recycled back into the operation,” he says. “The noise is contained well.” The Robesonia site is surrounded by a berm and trees. There is one home that is about 170 feet from the property line and there is a buffer between the home and the facility. Also, none of the noisy or dusty processing takes place right nearby the home. The Evansville site is isolated, with an industrial area on one side and a lake and heavily wooded area on the other two sides. In the 14 years the company has been in the recycling business, it has received no violations from government agencies or complaints from its neighbors. “We have a good neighbor policy with the township and the municipalities around us,” Zwicky says. “We have tried to be supportive of local activities, libraries, the fire department and, of course, the school.”

Recycled organic materials cover the spectrum of landscaping applications, soil amendments and specialty products.