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Recycling Facility of the Month:

Closing the Oil Loop

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Safety-Kleen's oil 'rerefining' facility outside Chicago processes some 100 million gallons of used oil a year, possibly including the discharge from your last oil change.

Have you ever wondered what happens to the oil in your car? If you have ever had it changed at a gas station or automotive outlet such as Goodyear or the AutoZone, you know that they recycle it. If you change the oil yourself, you probably take the used oil to a recycling center -- it's the law. But what happens from there? Is it really recycled or just disposed of?

If you live east of the Mississippi, chances are good that your oil ends up at Safety-Kleen's (Elgin, Ill.) rerefining facility in East Chicago, Ind., about 10 miles west of the Windy City. The company bills itself as the world's largest oil rerefiner. Its 180 service branches serve as the collection pickup points for more than 100,000 service stations, car dealerships, and generators of industrial oil, including hydraulic oil.

"We collect all over the U.S. and Canada," says Mike Ebert, manager of Safety-Kleen's East Chicago facility, one of the company's two oil rerefining facilities. "Since 1991, we've recovered over 700 million gallons of recycled oil."

Safety-Kleen's other oil recovery facility is in Breslau, Ontario, about an hour west of Toronto.

The East Chicago facility rerefines more than 100 million gallons per year, with Breslau rerefining 40 million gallons per year.

The Breslau facility opened in 1977 and began making lubricant in 1987. "The pioneers were at Breslau," said Ebert. "What we do now in East Chicago is a result of everything we learned at Breslau."

The East Chicago facility, which opened in 1991, employs 80 people, with an additional 20 working in marketing.

Twenty-plus years of experience

"Recycling" oil has traditionally meant burning it or putting it into a "lower" use. But Safety-Kleen doesn't burn the oil or use it for something else. Instead, it "rerefines" the oil, a process that restores oil so that it can go back to its original and intended use. The distinction that it is rerefined is an important one, says Jim Cavill, the company's vice president, oil marketing.

"It's important to remember that used oil has been around for a long time," he says, adding that it's only in the past 15 to 20 years that there's been such a push toward reuse.

The process starts like this: Once the oil is at the collection point, a Safety-Kleen representative visits a potential recycler and collects a sample of the oil, which is often a mixture of both automotive and industrial oil, Cavill says.