

HANDS-ON INNOVATION

Southern California's Blackburn family delivers cutting-edge environmental solutions

There's no doubt Universal Waste Systems is a large operation. With eight locations in Southern California and New Mexico that deliver service to more than 200,000 residential, commercial, industrial, construction and multifamily units each month, the company is one of the largest family-owned and operated businesses in the area. However, even as the company collects, processes and transfers more than a half-million tons of solid waste, recycling and green waste each year, the Blackburn family and their nearly 400 employees strive to offer excellent customer service, hands-on management and the personalized touch of a one-man operation.

"The company started with just me and two employees," Mark Blackburn says. "I began picking up trash and recycling, then expanded into portable services." Over time, the company expanded through a combination of internal growth and purchases of other small companies.

Blackburn and his son Mike now operate the flagship company for comprehensive waste management in the area. With a passion for service and a focus on cutting-edge environmental solutions, Universal Waste strives to make a positive impact.

"We not only spend a great deal of resources to be compliant with regulations, we spend time and effort to be good neighbors," Mike says.

Operational excellence

As Universal Waste expands products and markets — the New Mexico facility was added just last year — the way they do business stays constant. "When we add a new route, my father runs

the route for the first week," Mike says. "I think it's good for the rest of the guys to see."

Mark also still purchases most of the equipment, counting on the reliability of durability of machines such as the Hitachi ZW250 wheel loader to tackle demanding operations with minimal downtime. His ZW250, equipped with an optional waste package, handles 18-hour days at their new materials recovery facility in Santa Fe Springs.

With a 5.2-cubic-yard max loading capacity, powerful digging force and impressive travel speeds, the ZW250 is an exceptional choice for waste handling applications such as Universal Waste's. And while the Tier 4 Final engine reduces maintenance requirements thanks to its exhaust gas recirculation system and diesel oxidation catalyst that eliminates the need for DPF, Mark Blackburn, who has a maintenance manager at each facility, keeps his equipment in top-notch condition.

"We have eight full-time maintenance techs — one in every yard," he says. "We perform in-house maintenance, we use the machine telematics and we take advantage of extended warranties."

The employees also pitch in and take care of the equipment. Mike Smiley, the company's operations manager, says it doesn't hurt that Hitachi's equipment is both user-friendly and has features designed specifically for operator comfort. "If a machine is comfortable, they're more comfortable running it," he says.

Although Universal Waste's preventive maintenance eliminates a great deal of downtime, Mark appreciates the value of a quality dealer. That's why he appreciates his company's relationship



with Jeff Jones of Westrax Machinery, which serves all of Southern California. "It's important for a company to give good service," he says. "It's a big part of the relationship, and one of the reasons we're so happy with Westrax. They offer great service."

The feeling of respect is mutual. "The first word that comes to mind when I think of Universal Waste is 'innovative'," Jones says. "They are leaders in their industry, and genuine partners we enjoy working with. They have multiple locations with different challenges, and that gives us an opportunity to showcase our capabilities in demanding production operations."

Friends and family

Even with approximately 400 employees, Universal Waste still feels like family. Smiley says it's a great atmosphere, with a desire to accommodate every customer in every way. "We put a great deal of emphasis on providing outstanding customer service," he says.

Smiley also says the Blackburn family treats the Universal Waste employees like more than just employees. "Not only do we have good pay and benefits, but the Blackburns are out there every day in the field with guys," Smiley says. "It's a family atmosphere." ■