

Chicago Tribune

Breaking News, Since 1847

Paring down our e-waste heap: TVs, cellphones and other electronics don't belong in the trash

July 26, 2011

By Susan Carpenter

Special to Tribune Newspapers



Tech recyclers disassemble old electronics into recyclable parts such as plastic or metal to keep them out of landfills. (Chuck Berman/Chicago Tribune photo / March 10, 2011)

Americans have an insatiable appetite for the latest and greatest gadgets. We own an average of 23 consumer electronics per household and always want more.

But all those flat-screen TVs and iPhones come with an environmental cost. E-waste is the fastest-growing waste stream in the U.S. -- growing at a faster rate than regular household garbage and other mounting problems such as spent batteries and compact fluorescent light bulbs.

Americans got rid of 27 million TVs, 205 million computer products and more than 100 million cellphones and PDAs in 2007, according to the most recent figures from the [U.S. Environmental Protection Agency](#). Just 16% of that equipment was recycled. The rest was carted out to the garage and stowed away because of consumers' confusion about what to do. More commonly ewaste winds up in a landfill and stays there forever.

The relatively little that's not thrown away winds up with collectors and recyclers. Collectors take the recycled item from the consumer and give it to a recycler, who breaks it down into component pieces, separating a TV screen from its plastic case or a hard drive from a laptop computer, for example. The recycler then breaks down those components into salable commodities, such as plastic, glass or metal.

"Ten years ago, electronic waste wasn't even on our radar," said Thea McManus, associate director of the EPA in [Washington, D.C.](#) Now, she said, "it's an issue that needs special management."

Yet there is no federal law governing electronic trash. Although the EPA offers e-waste guidelines to consumers, manufacturers and retailers through a program called Plug-In to eCycling, and e-waste legislation is being drafted in Congress, consumers often are confused about what to do. And navigating the mishmash of mom-and-pop recycling centers, government-sanctioned drop-off spots and retailers' programs can be difficult.

Because many consumer electronics are thrown away long before they die, the EPA suggests reuse and refurbishment rather than the trash can as the first course of action "to mitigate the digital divide" between the perpetually upgrading, gadget-hungry haves and lower-income have-nots. Recycling, McManus said, "would be the last approach."

Though landfills are safe and highly engineered to handle disposal of electronics, she said, "that shouldn't be our first tier of waste management."

Even so, there are only 20 states that ban electronics from landfills because of their hazardous materials, such as the lead in cathode-ray-tube TVs, and their potential to be reclaimed and reused. Recapturing raw materials such as copper saves the energy, expense and environmental cost that it would have otherwise taken to mine new.

Consumers in [California](#) must pay a recycling fee at the point of sale for many electronic devices with a screen, including TVs, computer monitors and portable DVD players. The fee is \$8 to \$25 and is used to offset the cost of state-approved recyclers who break down, or "de-manufacture" the device, selling component parts on the commodities market or to companies that further process the materials.

That has resulted in a bevy of recycling options, many operated by government, retailers (such as [Best Buy](#) and AT&T) and manufacturers (such as Panasonic, [Toshiba](#) and Sharp, which sponsor a program called MRM).

Electronic Recyclers International, the country's largest e-recycler, processes 15 million pounds of e-waste each month at seven locations in six states. Among the firm's 2,000 clients: Best Buy, which "takes back consumer electronics and appliances regardless of where you bought it, what brand it is or how old it is," said Chris Boik, senior manager of environmental affairs for the [Minnesota](#)-based chain.

If the item is too large to process through a retail location -- a television with a screen larger than 32 inches or any major appliance, such as a washer/dryer or refrigerator -- the company offers a free haul-away service any time a Best Buy representative visits a customer's house. That could be a delivery person with a new TV or a member of the Geek Squad setting up or repairing a computer.

Since the retailer kicked off its e-recycling program last February, it has taken in more than 1 million e-castoffs.

"Our customers were increasingly looking to us to help them solve the problem of what to do with the old TVs," said Leo Raudys, senior director of Best Buy's environmental affairs. "It's quickly morphing into a core business function."

Raudys noted that the program is an expense for the company, but the hope is that it could break even, given increasing commodity prices and the additional foot traffic e-recycling brings to Best Buy's 1,000-plus locations.

Original URL:

<http://www.chicagotribune.com/classified/realestate/home/sc-home-0718-ewaste-20110723,0,5022084.story>