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Recycle electronics instead of trashing them

When it comes time to dispose of an old, boxy TV or desktop computer, many Wisconsin residents know that they should not go in the trash. Most electronics have been banned from landfills since 2010. Instead, residents can use E-Cycle Wisconsin to recycle electronics at nearly 400 locations around the state.

DNR surveys have shown, however, that many people aren't sure what to do with old electronics and store them in attics, basements and garages. A 2016 survey showed that Wisconsin households have an estimated 1.7 million unused TVs, 2.1 million unused computers, and 4.2 million unused cell phones.

Electronics can contain harmful materials like mercury, lead, cadmium and other heavy metals, as well as chemical flame retardants. Electronics also contain valuable reusable materials, including steel, gold, silver, copper and plastic.

"Electronics are resources that are too valuable to waste, and we can help both our economy and the environment by recycling them," said Sarah Murray, E-Cycle Wisconsin program coordinator.

The following electronics are banned from landfills and incinerators

- Computers (desktop, laptop, netbook and tablet computers)
- Desktop printers (including 3-D printers and those that scan, fax and/or copy)
- Monitors
- Televisions
- Cell phones
- E-readers
- DVD players, VCRs and DVRs
- Fax machines
- Computer mice and keyboards
- Other computer accessories such as hard drives, speakers, flash drives and modems

Residents may be asked to pay a fee to help cover the full cost of responsibly recycling their old electronics, especially larger, old TVs. Electronics manufacturers help pay for recycling in the E-Cycle Wisconsin program, but their payments do not always cover the full cost of carefully managing hazardous components.

For example, responsible electronics recyclers are facing a new and challenging problem: the leaded glass in tube TVs and monitors, which is toxic if not handled properly. Until recently, the glass was easily recycled into new tube TVs and monitors. But since most people have switched to flat-screen devices, recyclers now have to pay to send the glass to the few locations able to recycle it into something new. Often it costs a recycler more to process and recycle the glass than all of the other materials in the device are worth. To keep their businesses running, recyclers must charge a fee.

The costs of avoiding a recycling fee at an established collector could be much higher than people realize. “Dumping and pollution aside, information you entered into your computer or cell phone, like credit card numbers, social security numbers and passwords, can all be accessed long after the computer or phone stops working,” said Marcy McGrath, E-Cycle Wisconsin compliance specialist. “Simply deleting old documents does not make them disappear. You need to do a complete memory wipe, which many responsible electronics recyclers will do for you.”

Registered E-Cycle Wisconsin collectors are inspected by the DNR and send the electronics they collect to recyclers that are also registered with the program.

The DNR maintains an up-to-date list of collection sites registered with E-Cycle Wisconsin. Residents can find permanent drop-off sites and upcoming special collection events in their county. Go to dnr.wi.gov and search “e-cycle” for details.

For questions, contact the E-Cycle Wisconsin program at (608) 266-2111 or DNRWAcycling@wisconsin.gov.