

Increasingly, states push for e-waste recycling

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In this Aug. 27, 2009 photo, Bryan Siens, center, and Frederick Qualls disassemble televisions in Indianapolis, at Workforce Inc., a nonprofit electronics recycler that contracts with the city of Indianapolis to recycle electronic waste the city collects at hazardous household waste drop-off sites. (AP Photo/Michael Conroy)

(AP) -- Frustrated by inaction in Congress, a growing number of states are trying to reduce the rising tide of junked TVs, computers and other electronics that have become one of the nation's fastest-growing waste streams.

Nineteen states have passed laws requiring the recycling of old electronics, which contain both precious metals and toxic pollutants and are piling up in garages and closets - or worse, getting dumped overseas. Thirteen other states are considering laws.

But as these state measures take effect, the [electronics industry](#) is pushing back against what it calls a hard-to-follow "patchwork."

Two trade groups, the [Consumer Electronics Association](#) and the Information Technology Industry Council, are suing New York City over its recycling law, which will make electronics manufacturers provide free collection of electronics weighing more than 15 pounds. That includes "orphan" waste made by now-defunct manufacturers.

The groups contend the law, which requires detailed paper trails documenting their recycling, will cost their member companies more than \$200 million annually.

Parker Brugge, the Consumer Electronics Association's vice president of environmental affairs and industry sustainability, said the states' laws burden manufacturers with drafting state-specific recycling plans. His group would prefer a national e-waste law that sets a uniform policy and spreads the responsibility of recycling among companies, consumers and local governments.

Barbara Kyle, national coordinator of the Electronics Takeback Coalition, a group that promotes e-waste recycling, thinks manufacturers really want a national policy with less teeth than the state laws.

"They talk about how much they want a federal bill, but what they want is a weak federal bill. They don't want to have to do what the state laws are making them do," she said.

Several e-waste bills have been introduced in Congress over the years but none has passed.

In April, the House authorized the Environmental Protection Agency to award grants promoting e-waste recycling. The Senate has not yet voted

on it.

Meanwhile, the amount of e-waste grows. In 2007, Americans disposed of 2.25 million tons of TVs, computers, cell phones, fax machines, printers and scanners. That's more than twice the amount generated in 1999, according to the EPA.

Less than a fifth of e-waste overall is recycled, which allows for the copper, silver, gold and other precious metals inside to be salvaged and resold. Landfills get many of the rest of the discarded devices, which also have toxic hazards lurking inside - from lead in TVs and computer monitors with cathode-ray tubes to cadmium in rechargeable batteries.

The EPA says stringent landfill regulations keep those toxic materials from posing significant threats to the nation's groundwater. But millions of tons of e-waste are shipped each year to developing nations, where scrap yards crush or burn components, exposing workers to dangerous fumes.

Most of the state e-waste laws make electronics manufacturers responsible for collecting and recycling their discarded products at little or no cost to consumers - who increasingly are being banned from setting electronics out for regular trash pickups.

Some of the laws specify how convenient companies must make it for people to dispose of old electronics, while others set collection goals companies have to meet.

Companies are generally given the flexibility to decide how they will reach those targets. They can stage periodic collection events, for instance, or they can count products collected by their own recycling programs or ones run by municipalities and nonprofits.

About half the states require electronics manufacturers to handle not only their own products but also varying amounts of the "orphan" devices that consumers drop off, said Jason Linnell, executive director of the National Center for Electronics Recycling.

Only one state, California, makes consumers pay upfront for e-waste recycling. Under its law, consumers must pay between \$8 and \$25 above the price of TVs, computer monitors, laptop computers and portable DVD players.

Last year, California paid \$96 million collected from that fee to recyclers and collectors who handled about 218 million pounds of old electronics, said Chris Peck, spokesman for the California Integrated Waste Management Board.

In April, Indiana became the latest state to pass an e-waste law. It requires makers of TVs, monitors, and laptops to recycle 60 percent of the weight of the products they sell each year in Indiana.

Beginning next year, companies must register with the state, pay annual fees and file reports detailing the devices they sold and how much e-waste they funneled into recycling programs. Companies face fines if they don't meet the 60 percent goal.

Minnesota's similar 2007 law led to about 34 million pounds of electronics - some 6.5 pounds for each state resident - being collected in its first year, said Garth Hickie, the product stewardship team leader for the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency.

One 2007 collection event at the Mall of America had to be cut short after organizers were overwhelmed by people hauling in about 1 million pounds of electronics that had been cluttering their homes.

"Some people waited in line for two hours to drop off material," Hickle said. "That just shows you that if the collection options are there, people are ready to get rid of this stuff."

Bob Davis' home and garage in Lake City, Minn., were stuffed with more than 30 old PCs and parts from his days repairing computers. Last year, Davis, 62, finally rounded them up and hauled them to a recycling business that is part of Minnesota's system.

"My wife was always yelling at me, 'When are you going to get rid of this stuff?'" Davis said. "I'd say, 'Well, when I find a place that will take it.'"

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