

In 27 states, don't call your old computer 'trash'

January 4 2011, By DAVE GRAM , Associated Press

(AP) -- Get a new flat-screen TV for Christmas and wondering what to do with the old console? Finally replacing that turntable with an MP3 player? Just upgrading your Mac? Whatever it is, you'd better check your state's books before taking out the trash.

In Vermont, a ban on electronic waste in landfills took effect New Year's Day, and New York, Pennsylvania and South Carolina are soon to follow suit with their own laws encouraging recycling of "e-waste" and banning landfill dumping.

"I think it's a good idea," said Kevin Wilkinson, a Montpelier resident and self-described "geek wannabe" with a lot of old computer hardware sitting around his house. "There's a lot of heavy metals in the circuit boards and whatnot. It's good to keep that stuff out of the landfills."

The Environmental Protection Agency estimated in 2007 that the U.S. generates about 2 million tons a year of e-waste, which can contain lead, mercury, cadmium and other potentially harmful chemicals. If those toxins leach from landfills into the environment, risks to human health can include cancer and nervous system damage, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

The EPA estimates that in 2008, 13.6 percent of e-waste generated was recovered. Scott Cassel, executive director of the Boston-based Product Stewardship Institute, which promotes such recycling, said it's believed the percentage has grown significantly since then, as more states have

passed and implemented laws.

"The laws are working really well," he said. "States with laws have higher recycling rates than those without laws."

To date, 27 states have passed recycling programs, landfill bans or both, according to the National Center for Electronics Recycling, which works with state agencies implementing the laws.

In states without recycling laws, consumers like Wilkinson are left to safely dispose of old equipment on their own, generally by paying a few dollars per item at a computer store or by going to big-box retailers that sponsor programs to take old items.

States' laws vary in strictness. Vermont's, which took effect Saturday, bans the disposal of e-waste in landfills and requires that it be separated from household trash.

It takes effect in two stages: A long list of electronic devices was banned from landfills as of Jan. 1, and a much shorter list will be covered by a recycling program free to consumers and paid for by manufacturers to be set up by July 1.

Most states ask electronics makers to pay for recycling programs - both to make sure they are run properly and to remove the temptation for consumers to avoid added costs by dumping illegally.

As new state laws have been passed, they've covered a longer list of electronics over time, generally starting out with computer monitors and televisions and later extending to accessories. A Maryland law passed in 2005 explicitly said it did not cover peripherals like a mouse, printer or keyboard; Vermont's law covers them.

"The Vermont law is taking advantage of lessons learned in other states," said Cassel. His group began a decade ago to promote laws requiring electronics makers to help pay to recycle their own products.

For businesses, knowing they'll be responsible for taking care of their products at the end of their useful lives means "now they have an incentive to have these products contain fewer hazardous materials and be recycled more easily," said Clare Inness, marketing coordinator for Vermont's Chittenden Solid Waste District.

Walter Alcorn of the Consumer Electronics Association said industry supports recycling. The main worry for manufacturers is a lack of uniformity among state laws, he said.

"There is quite a patchwork of varying state mandates on this issue," said Alcorn, the association's vice president for environmental affairs. "It makes compliance a challenge. It drains efficiency from the overall system."

Environmentalists have noted in recent years that much of the U.S. waste ends up being shipped overseas, where it is often dismantled in ways potentially harmful to workers and the environment.

Robin Ingenthron, CEO of Good Point Recycling in Middlebury, said that circuit boards usually go to smelters in Europe, where metals are extracted, and that cathode ray tube glass often goes to developing countries like Mexico or Malaysia, where older-style computer monitors are still sought.

Wilkinson, who usually paid \$5 to \$10 per item to recycle old equipment at a local computer shop, said he wasn't likely to get rid of his piled-up gear all at once.

"I'm a pack rat. I have a hard time throwing stuff away," he said. After learning that the free computer recycling program doesn't begin until July, he added: "Oh, good, now I have a perfect excuse."

More information: National Center for Electronics Recycling:
<http://www.electronicrecycling.org>

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