

Europe must do more to cut e-waste, report finds

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Europe must do more to improve the collection and recycling of electronic waste, according to a new report for the European Commission by a United Nations University (UNU)-led consortium.

Europe produces 10.3 million tonnes of electronic waste a year, around a quarter of the world's total, and this figure is predicted to rise to 12.3 million tonnes per year by 2020. The EU's 2002 Waste Electric and Electronic Equipment (WEEE) Directive is designed to increase levels of recycling in the sector.

The new report reveals that currently just 25% of Europe's medium-sized household appliances and 40% of larger appliances are collected

for salvage and recycling. The figure for small appliances is close to zero. This leaves 'substantial room for improvement', the report states.

'The study suggests possible long-term [collection](#) rate targets of around 60% for small appliances like MP3 players and hairdryers, as well as for medium sized audio equipment, microwaves and TVs and 75% for large appliances like refrigerators and washing machines,' said Ruediger Kuehr of the UNU. 'If implemented, these targets would lead to a reported European harvest of roughly 5.3 million tonnes of e-waste by 2011, up from 2.2 million tonnes today.'

The report shows wide differences in performance by different Member States, both overall and for different categories of WEEE. The authors note that this could be due to a number of factors, including availability of collection points, geographical location, culture, waste collection ways and financing mechanisms.

The composition of electrical waste is also changing as new products enter the market. For example, flat screen televisions are replacing cathode ray tube (CRT) models, and CFCs are being phased out of fridges.

Another point raised by the report is the fact that the environmental advantages of recycling vary from product to product, covering issues such as reducing toxic pollution, conserving natural resources, reducing energy consumption and preventing emissions that cause global warming and ozone layer depletion. The report's authors therefore recommend differentiated collection targets for different e-waste categories.

'For instance the top environmental priority is to gain control over the chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) in old refrigerators,' said Dr Jaco Huisman of the UNU. 'By increasing the reported EU27 collection rate from the 27% achieved in 2005 to the suggested 75% by 2011, a major reduction

of chemicals destroying the ozone later would be achieved but also, because CFCs are a powerful greenhouse gas, it would save the equivalent of roughly 34 million tonnes of CO₂ from entering the atmosphere.'

The report sets out a series of recommendations to improve the situation. The authors call for more research into the influence of new products such as flat screen TVs on the waste stream composition and for studies on better treatment options for these products.

For medium-sized appliances, they recommend research into the value of splitting high value products from other small appliances, as is already done in some countries.

Another key priority identified by the report's authors is raising consumer awareness to stimulate greater levels of e-waste collection.

'Electronic products have a great positive impact on our lives,' said UN Under-Secretary-General and UNU Rector Konrad Osterwalder. 'However, their increasing availability and affordability means that they also present a growing environmental problem, one we all personally need to address. The old saying - reduce, reuse, recycle, applies particularly well to [electronic waste](#).'

Provided by CORDIS

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