

Ontario to change how e-waste is processed

By Dianne Saxe

Each year, Canadians spend millions of dollars on the latest electronic devices. From digital cameras and laptops to video game systems and televisions, Statistics Canada estimates that in 2004, this figured topped \$880 million.

As we replace more and more of these devices in favour of newer, quicker and fancier products, we are increasingly challenged to find safe and smart ways of disposing of the older equipment.

For instance, a few years ago, consumers were replacing their computers every three or four years. Now, a quarter of computer owners replace their systems every year. The average Canadian home computer is 2.5 years old, down from 2.7 in 2006. While this may be good for businesses and manufacturers, there is the problem of what to do with all those "old" items.

The United Nations says that e-waste is growing and estimates that 20 to 50 million tonnes of electronic waste are generated every year worldwide. In Canada, we send nearly three-quarters of our annual discarded electronic products to the local landfill; much of the rest is exported overseas. This amounts to over 140,000 tonnes of e-waste each year, with over 70,000 tonnes being produced in Ontario alone.

The threat of e-waste

Landfills contain all sorts of materials - from your old desk chair, to that worn out mattress - much of which is benign. But televisions, computer monitors and other high tech electronic devices are particularly unsuitable for landfill, because they are full of heavy metals. Some of these metals are too valuable to throw away. Others, such as lead, cadmium and mercury, are too toxic to put in the ground, where they leach into ground and surface water. One quarter of the glass in CRT monitors, for example, is typically made of the potent neurotoxin, lead.

What is being done?

Over the last year, government-owned Waste Diversion Ontario has been working on a plan for an industry-funded waste diversion program for Waste Electronic and Electrical Equipment (WEEE). A draft of Phase I of the Plan was released for public comment on January 14, 2008; a link to it is available at <http://envirolaw.ca>. The Plan must be finalized by March 31, 2008.

As directed by the Minister of Environment, Phase I will cover desktop and notebook computers, peripherals, monitors, printers/fax machines and televisions. They hope to recover 48% of Phase I e-waste the first year, increasing to 65% by 2013. Phase II will deal with

telephones, stereos, PDAs, copiers, radios, speakers and cameras; Phase III will cover other electronics.

Where will the money come from?

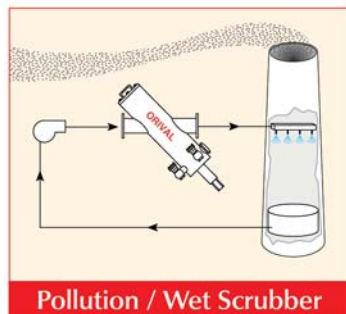
Funding for the Plan is likely to be provided by electronics manufacturers and vendors through a new non-profit corporation called Ontario Electronic Stewardship. The total cost is expected to be at least \$48 million per year. They may recover the cost through an extra charge when electronics are sold.

If commodity prices stay high, it is also possible that the metal in old electronics could be worth enough to pay for their collection. Many devices contain copper and precious metals such as gold and silver. In a single year, roughly 1,600 tonnes of copper, 35 tonnes of silver, 1.5 tonnes of palladium, and 3.4 tonnes of gold could be recovered by recycling 100 million cell phones.

These metals are valuable since they can be easily re-captured and have already been refined. In fact, electronic scrap metals can be cheaper and more valuable than traditional scrap metals found in other products like cars. As a result, mining giant Xstrata PLC has become the world's largest consumer of e-scrap; Teck Cominco is also considering refining e-waste.

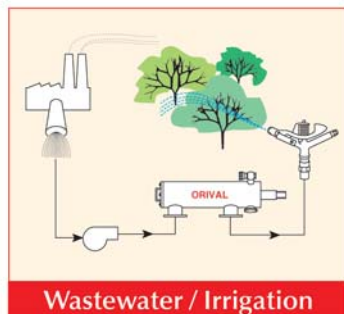
Dianne Saxe is an environmental law specialist. For more information visit www.envirolaw.ca

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