

KEEPING UP WITH TECHNOLOGY: ENSURING SAFEGUARDS FOR ELECTRONIC RECYCLING



Last year, I wrote here about the ever-increasing amount of electronic waste, or e-waste, produced in our country, and the recycling programs that have been created through public-private partnerships to safely process that waste. As the holiday season approaches – and more cell phones, tablets, computers and televisions are upgraded and replaced – it’s a good moment to evaluate our progress in e-waste recycling, and to highlight research during the past year that has emphasized the continued need for responsible e-waste recyclers.

According to the Consumer Electronics Association (CEA), Americans now own approximately 24 electronic products per household, each with an ever-shortening lifespan. These older electronics enter the waste stream, as their owners favor more cutting-edge gadgets – and this process is happening faster each year. More than 3.5 million tons of used electronics were collected and processed in the U.S. in 2010, representing a nearly 200 percent increase from 2009, according to the 2011 *Electronics Recycling Industry Survey*.

E-waste is the fastest growing commodity in the North American waste stream. Volume is growing at more than three times the rate of other commodities, though there are few facilities to properly process them. Older electronics may contain potentially harmful materials such as lead, mercury and cadmium, but also contain valuable materials that may be reclaimed for use in new devices.

The potentially grave health impacts linked with improper e-cycling highlights the importance of third-party certified e-waste recyclers. Earlier this year, a study revealed that workers in uncertified Chinese e-cycling facilities and residents living downwind of those facilities displayed symptoms of respiratory illness resulting from improper e-cycling procedures.

Studies like this highlight the importance of safe e-cycling and help draw much needed attention from the highest levels of federal government. Following legislation passed by many states, last November the Obama administration directed several government agencies to establish the Interagency Task Force on Electronics Stewardship. In July, the task force released a report stating that one of its four overarching goals is to “increase the safe and effective management of used electronics in the U.S.,” and outlined collaborative next steps for the EPA, Department of Labor and electronics and recycling industries to achieve that goal. One of those action items focused on third-party certification of e-waste recyclers, such as the e-Stewards® Certification program, created by the Basel Action Network (BAN). E-Stewards formally recognizes electronics recyclers that adhere to BAN’s stringent environmentally and socially responsible practices when recovering e-waste containing hazardous components. This program is the only e-recycler certification endorsed by the Natural Resources Defense Council, the Sierra Club, Greenpeace USA, the Electronics TakeBack Coalition and 68 other environmental organizations.

WM Recycle America's efforts to prioritize the safety of workers and the environment have recently been recognized by BAN. This month, WM Recycle America announced that all seven of its North American e-cycling facilities have earned BAN's e-Stewards Standard for Responsible Recycling and Reuse of Electronic Equipment®.

This certification comes in addition to WM Recycle America's standing certification by the Responsible Recycling (R2) program and the RIOS® certification standard. The R2 program is a set of standards created to "protect public health and the environment, improve worker safety practices, and reduce potential exposures." Its partner program, the RIOS® certification standard, oversees integrated quality, environmental, health and safety management in the recycling industry. Together, R2/RIOS provides an exacting standard for responsible electronics reuse and recycling, as well as recognition for compliant companies as Certified Electronics Recyclers®.

As more states pass laws requiring proper electronics recycling, we anticipate this sector of the waste industry will continue to grow. As it grows, we'll address each new challenge with safety in mind. Already WM has joined forces with LG Electronics USA and other manufacturers to develop recycling programs that are easy and affordable for customers.

As the world becomes more tech-savvy, it is important to keep in mind the health and environmental implications of our progress. Through the R2/RIOS and e-Stewards programs, companies can follow a set of stringent guidelines to ensure that environmental, health and safety management systems are in place to track materials, and minimize emissions and worker exposure during electronics recycling operations. By developing secure recycling practices now, we can make sure the world's Technorati continue to enjoy all the latest gadgets with the assurance that their old products can be recycled or reused without hurting the planet.

Source: <http://earthandindustry.com/2011/12/keeping-up-with-technology-ensuring-safeguards-for-electronic-recycling/>