

Permission to reprint or copy this article or photo, other than personal use, must be obtained from The Seattle Times. Call 206-464-3113 or e-mail resale@seattletimes.com with your request.

EcoConsumer

Recharge, recycle, resolve to reduce battery discards

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

In a perfect "green" world, all batteries would be rechargeable.

Disposable household batteries generate prolific waste of metals and other resources. One rechargeable battery replaces 500 to 1,000 disposables. And consumers can save hundreds of dollars using rechargeables.

Just consider how well the concept works for cellphones. Many of us recharge the battery inside our phone several times a week.

Yet in most of our portable electronic devices from flashlights to digital cameras to toys disposable batteries rule. Less than 5 percent of all batteries sold in the U.S. are rechargeable, according to battery-maker Rayovac.

Hybrid batteries

But reusable batteries are making a charge. Several battery manufacturers have recently introduced new rechargeable nickel metal hydride (NiMH) batteries.

Nicknamed "hybrids," they represent a major breakthrough. Unlike the older generation of rechargeable batteries, you don't need to charge the Rayovac Hybrid, Sanyo Eneloop or Hybrio batteries before you use them the first time. They also do not discharge quickly when idle, another problem with old-fashioned rechargeables.

Battery resources

For more information about disposing of batteries, see the Web sites or call the number listed below.

I recently bought two AA hybrid rechargeable NiMH batteries and a compact charger, packaged together, for \$25 at a local camera store. Sure enough, these batteries worked great without

Local Hazardous Waste Management Program in King County: 206-296-4692 or www.govlink.org/hazwaste/house/products/list.cfm

King County Solid Waste Division: www.metrokc.gov/dnrp/swd/wdidw

Rechargeable Battery Recycling Corp.: www.rbrc.org/call2recycle/dropoff

U.S. Environmental Protection Agency: www.epa.gov/msw/battery.htm

pre-charging.

The hybrids are ideal for high-drain devices such as digital cameras. If you shoot a lot of photos and currently use disposable batteries, you'll notice savings in just a few months.

Companies improving

Overall, the battery industry has made significant environmental strides in the past 20 years. For example, today's alkaline batteries contain no added mercury. The industry has also reduced toxics in other products, such as cellphone batteries.

Manufacturers continue to pour millions of dollars into research to develop lighter weight, more durable, less toxic batteries. They also may well introduce other innovative new rechargeable batteries, but only if the public shows an interest.

Disposing of batteries

All batteries eventually lose their spark. So what should be done with all those little metallic discards from our high-tech society?

Alkaline batteries the standard disposables such as AA, AAA, C, D and 9-volt are technically recyclable. A few area cities take them at recycling events, and the Ikea store in Renton also accepts them for recycling at no charge.

But old alkaline batteries are not considered a health or environmental risk, so King County, Seattle and other local governments allow them to be disposed of in household garbage.

Most disposable button batteries, on the other hand, contain added mercury. These include watch, hearing aid and digital thermometer batteries. It is illegal in King County to place button batteries in the garbage. They are accepted for recycling at no charge at Ikea and at the Seattle and Bellevue household-hazardous waste facilities, and at the Wastemobile operated by the Local Hazardous Waste Management Program in King County. Several other recyclers also take them for a small fee.

Rechargeable batteries often contain toxic substances such as cadmium and lead, and they should be recycled as well. The industry-funded Rechargeable Battery Recycling Corporation's Web site lists more than 400 retail locations in Western Washington that accept spent rechargeable batteries and old cellphones at no charge. These include selected stores operated by Target, Radio Shack, Lowe's, Office Depot, Bartell Drugs and other chains.

Because of toxics they contain, energy used to make and transport them, and disposal issues, the 3 billion dry-cell batteries used by Americans each year can be more negative than positive for the environment.

To reduce their impact, use rechargeables when you can, and unplug the charger when not in use. Also consider the latest solar-powered or hand-crank operated electronic devices, which will save you money and help the planet by avoiding batteries altogether.

CFL follow-up

To follow-up on my March 3 column about compact fluorescent lamps (CFLs), several readers have asked if "three-way" (three different light settings) CFLs are available. Energy Star lists more than 50 three-way CFLs at www.energystar.gov. Click on Lighting, then CFLs, then Product Search Advanced.

If you missed the column on CFLs, it can be found at seattletimes.com. Search for "EcoConsumer" and then click on "Now you're out of excuses time to switch to CFL bulbs."

The monthly EcoConsumer column aims to help readers balance consuming and conserving. Tom Watson is project manager for King County's Recycling and Environmental Services. Reach him at tom.watson@metrokc.gov. Watch for more EcoConsumer resources from King County at www.KCecoconsumer.com.