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Product stewardship leads companies to provide free e-waste recycling

By Tom Watson
Special to The Seattle Times

Recycling is never really free. Someone has to pay for it, and traditionally it's been government or the public.

Take electronics, for example. Just weeks ago you might have shelled out \$30 or more to recycle a TV. But under Washington state's innovative new law regulating electronic waste, or "e-waste," the manufacturers now pay for recycling of TVs and computers.

Since the law just took effect on Jan. 1, consumers still have a megabyte of questions. Today we'll get plugged in to how it all works.

Q: Let's cut to the chase. Which electronics can I recycle at no charge, and where?

A: The new E-Cycle Washington program covers televisions, computers (desktop and laptop units) and computer monitors. Households, small businesses and nonprofits can now recycle those items at no cost at authorized collection sites, including more than 45 locations in King County. A fee may be charged for pickup service. For the list of recyclers, and more details, go to www.ecyclewashington.org or call 800-RECYCLE (800-732-9253).

Q: What about e-waste not included under the new law?

A: You can also recycle other electronic equipment such as keyboards, printers and music players, but you may have to pay a fee. Electronics recyclers who have pledged to handle the equipment in an environmentally sound manner are listed at www.takeitbacknetwork.org. All E-Cycle Washington recyclers must meet criteria for green practices.

Q: Why is recycling so important anyway?

A: Lead, mercury, cadmium, toxic flame retardants and other nasties often lurk inside those shiny home electronics. Because we need to keep that stuff out of landfills, the disposal of computer monitors and TVs in the garbage has been illegal in Seattle for several years. The rest of King County has a more extensive disposal ban, covering monitors, TVs, computers and cellphones. Snohomish County also restricts the disposal of computers, monitors and TVs.

Q: Isn't reuse of electronic equipment better than recycling?

A: Yes, and some charities and other E-Cycle Washington and Take It Back Network partners sell or donate a portion of their collected equipment to be reused. If your old electronics still work well, you may also find a home for them through online or newspaper classified ad listings or exchanges.

Cellphones are prime candidates for reuse. Turn them in at no charge at more than 300 retailers in Western Washington, through the Call2Recycle program funded by the rechargeable-battery industry (find locations at www.rbrc.org). Most collected cellphones get refurbished and reused, and they are often sold in developing countries.

Q: When I take in a computer or cellphone through the E-Cycle Washington or Call2Recycle programs, can I assume they will

safely erase all my old data?

A: No. Some computer recyclers may offer a data-erasing service, usually for a fee. With a quick Internet search you can also find tips on how to remove data yourself from specific brands of equipment, but be sure your sources are credible. Info on erasing your cellphone data is at www.rbcc.org/consumer/howitallworks_faq.shtml.

Q: Why should manufacturers pay for recycling?

A: It's called "product stewardship" — the concept that manufacturers should take full responsibility for products they sell, including paying the costs of recycling. Product stewardship may be voluntary but usually requires a law to ensure that all manufacturers participate.

Q: I love this idea. Any chance it will happen for other products?

A: Bills introduced in January in the state Legislature would require industries to fund the recycling of fluorescent bulbs and tubes and the proper disposal of unused medications. Contact your legislators if you support these solutions, or visit the Northwest Product Stewardship Council's Web site (www.productstewardship.net) for more info.

Recycling still won't be free, since manufacturers will incorporate the costs into the price of the product. But product stewardship takes the financial burden off governments and the general public, and it also gives manufacturers an incentive to design products that are easier to recycle and less toxic. That's definitely something for consumers to get charged up about.