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Environment



Europe Limits Heavy Metals in Electronic and Electrical Equipment

BRUSSELS, Belgium, June 14, 2000 (ENS) - The European Commission has called upon electronics and electrical manufacturers to replace dangerous heavy metals in their products. In recycling, collection and incentive measures announced Tuesday, the commission set its sights on one of Europe's fastest growing sources of waste - electrical and electronic equipment.

From fridges and washing machines, to TVs and toasters, household electronic waste constitutes four percent of municipal waste in the European Union (EU). But it is growing by 16 to 28 percent every five years - three times as fast as the growth of average municipal waste - making it one of the fastest growing waste streams on the continent.

Under its Directive on Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment (WEEE), the commission has adopted two proposals that will limit the use of various heavy metals in electrical and electronic equipment and make producers responsible for taking back and recycling these goods.



Piles of electronic waste are growing across Europe. Here, demonstrators stack junked electronics at Microsoft headquarters protesting a U.S. lobby against European legislation to ban hazardous materials and make producers recycle

their computer waste. (Photo by Jeffrey High/Image Productions)

courtesy Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition)

Electronic waste is one of the largest known sources of heavy metals and organic pollutants entering municipal landfills and incinerators. The European Commission wants electronic goods manufacturers to replace lead, mercury, cadmium and hexavalent chromium with less harmful substances by 2008. Two types of brominated flame retardants, PBB and PBDE, must be substituted by the same date, unless replacements are unable to meet fire safety standards.

The Commission's announcement of plans to deal with Europe's growing mountain of waste electronic and electrical equipment has drawn a mixed response. Though industry and public interest groups are relieved that a concrete proposal exists after a seven-year drafting process, most say there are still flaws in the draft legislation.

Environment Commissioner Margot Wallström called the proposals a major step towards sustainable production and consumption. "It is particularly important to implement the key principles of EU waste management policy, especially the prevention and the recycling of waste, in this area," she said.

Environment Commissioner Margot Wallstrom of Sweden (Photo courtesy European Commission)



However, European electronic manufacturers had argued that they need cadmium, lead and mercury and that a ban could hurt the industry. The association representing Europe's electronics industry, Orgalime, lobbied the commission last year to exempt harmful substances in certain applications.

Orgalime - also known as the Liaison Group of the European Mechanical, Electrical, Electronic and Metalworking Industries - claimed that there is no viable alternative to these substances in many applications. Its 25 member trade federations, representing some 100,000 companies in 16 Western European countries, will now find themselves paying for the new legislation.

In line with the polluter pays principle, producers will have to organise and finance the treatment, recovery and disposal of waste. The European Commission hopes manufacturers will heed these measures and the need to reduce hazardous substances at the design stage of their products.

Since more than 90 percent of electronic waste is disposed of without pre-treatment, depollution or proper recycling, member states will have to organize collection from private households and producers will then channel the waste into certified treatment facilities. Treatment standards could be in force by 2006.