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E-waste flooding landfills

By Patrick McMahon, USA TODAY

SEATTLE — Worn out, obsolete, fried or just plain dead. Yesterday's computers, cell phones, VCRs and television sets are headed for the nation's 2,200 landfills by the ton. Cities and states are scrambling to cope with electronic waste. "Local governments all over the country are trying to deal with this," says Sego Jackson, a solid-waste official in Snohomish County, Wash., north of Seattle. "We can't do the same old 'government-pays-all' approach. We can't afford it."

"This is a huge problem for us in California," says Michael Papparian, a member of the board that manages solid waste in that state.

Although discarded electronics make up only 1% of the USA's garbage volume, "proliferation of consumer electronics has gotten way ahead of cities and counties' ability to deal with it," says Michael Alexander, senior research associate of the National Recycling Coalition in Alexandria, Va.

It's not just collection and landfill costs that worry some officials and consumer advocates. Watchdog groups fear that lead, cadmium, mercury and other hazardous materials in electronic devices could leak from landfills into groundwater and endanger public health and the environment.

The consumer electronics industry, however, says health concerns are exaggerated. "If it's safe enough to be placed on the table where you eat," says Sony Electronics Vice President Mark Small, "it should be safe enough in a landfill."

The focus on discarded electronics, or "e-waste," comes as the growth of recycling slows across the USA.

"In the 1990s, we got the easy stuff" such as cans, bottles and newspapers, says Bruce Goddard, spokesman for the Alameda County Waste Management Authority in the San Francisco Bay Area. "Now we have the tough ones left to deal with — like e-waste."

E-waste topped the agenda at last week's 20th annual National Recycling Congress here. This week, government, industry, academic and activist-group representatives will meet in Tampa as part of a yearlong effort to find a national solution. The meeting is funded in part by the Environmental Protection Agency.

Manufacturers, retailers, local and state governments, and consumer activists agree that reusing and recycling electronics is the best way to cope with e-waste. But with less than 10% now recycled, the agreement stops there. The debate centers on who is responsible: manufacturers, retailers, consumers, waste handlers or all of them.

"There is only one person who is going to pay this in the end, and that is the consumer," Small says, "whether it's a hidden fee at the time of purchase or some kind of tax or payment at the end. Our goal is to make the payment be zero."

He says Sony and others are designing products that use more recycled materials — "material that is less toxic and less hazardous."

Some countries in Europe and Asia have enacted "extended producer responsibility" laws. They require manufacturers or importers to collect their products at "end of life" and ensure sorting and recycling — often without additional charge.

In the USA, many local governments are struggling to find an answer. "Cities and towns have the most

responsibility for handling the trash and the least power to compel manufacturers to deal with it," says Geoff Beckwith, a former Massachusetts state legislator and executive director of the Massachusetts Municipal Association. Diverse solutions are being tested:

- Hundreds of drop-off programs are being operated across the country by governments, non-profit groups, retailers, manufacturers and recyclers. Consumers sometimes pay a fee. The Electronics Industries Alliance, an industry group, offers a state-by-state list on www.eiae.org.
- California and Massachusetts have banned computer monitors from the states' landfills and incinerators. Several dozen cities in the two states, including San Francisco, also have passed resolutions supporting "producer take-back" rules.
- A few cities pick up electronic trash curbside. Others provide referrals to recyclers. Seattle's King County publishes a list of 32 recyclers, retailers and charities that accept e-waste or trade-ins.
- Non-profit groups are promoting the use of discarded computers that may still be useful for schools and job training.
- In Connecticut, manufacturers Sony, Panasonic and Sharp pay a recycler to process their products that consumers turn in at statewide collection events.
- Hewlett-Packard and IBM take back discarded computers for a fee. Under HP's Planet Partners mail-in program, consumers pay \$14 to \$34 per computer.
- Best Buy, the Minneapolis-based consumer electronics retailer, staged 10 recycling events last year in seven states and plans up to 35 this year. The company takes back most consumer electronics items for free but charges \$10 for computer monitors and \$15 for TV sets.

Health and environmental concerns are growing as e-waste accumulates. A recent industry study said there are 2 to 3 pounds of lead in average 18-inch TV sets and computer monitors. Consumer groups say that

figure is closer to 4 to 6 pounds and warn that over-exposure to lead can damage kidneys and the nervous and reproductive systems. (Lead is used in the glass of cathode-ray tubes to shield users from exposure to harmful radiation.)

Holly Evans of the industry association says lead in electronics rarely is in a form that could be absorbed into groundwater and is no more dangerous than lead in crystal glassware.

But Ted Smith, executive director of the Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition, watchdog group in California, says, "E-waste is one of the fastest-growing and most toxic waste streams, threatening human health and the environment."