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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Quirk in the law: the problem of CRTs (that means your old TVs and computer monitors)

By [John Wiegand](#)

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A “quirk” in the law that outlines Michigan’s electronics takeback program has recyclers concerned that many old-style TVs and computer monitors could soon end up in the landfill even though they contain harmful pollutants such as lead.

As original equipment manufacturers of electronics have stopped offering subsidies for recyclers to process cathode ray tube (CRT) TVs and monitors — the bulky displays that adorned desks and entertainment centers for decades, recyclers have begun phasing out their recycling programs or have started to charge customers to recycle the products.

Original equipment manufacturers such as Sony and Panasonic had subsidized recyclers’ programs for years, but lately that funding has dried up, said Scott Vander Kooy, president of Grand Rapids-based Comprenew, a nonprofit electronics recycler.

“We’ve noticed a dramatic change within the last couple of months,” Vander Kooy said. “It’s become very clear that instead of receiving money for these devices, we are looking at major costs to make sure they are kept out of the environment.”

In October, the Grand Rapids-based nonprofit announced that it would begin charging customers between \$8 and \$50 to recycle CRT computer monitors and televisions starting this month.

CRT monitors contain between five and 10 pounds of lead, depending on the weight of the product, Vander Kooy said. Now that customers will need to

pay to recycle their CRTs, there's growing concern that the unwanted electronics will end up in vacant fields and parking lots, making them susceptible to damage and posing environmental hazards, he said.

The products could also end up in one of the state's landfills, since Michigan is among the 30 states that currently do not have a wholesale ban on electronics dumping, Vander Kooy said.

While some landfills will not accept electronic waste, the anti-dumping policy exists on a case-by-case basis, he said.

"CRTs are probably the most harmful consumer product that has ever been manufactured, and that harm is exponentially increased because of the sheer volume," Vander Kooy said.

Goodwill Industries also announced in October that it would be phasing out its CRT collection program in West Michigan over the next year. While the organization has accepted the CRT products throughout its history, manufacturers this year stopped paying a 2-cent-per-pound subsidy to help cover the cost of the recycling process, said Nick Carlson, vice president of donated goods operations at Goodwill Industries of Greater Grand Rapids Inc.

"This is not just a Goodwill problem, this is part of a much larger problem," Carlson said. "We've been a solution and now we are being pinched to the point where we can't be."

Without the subsidy, Goodwill will now incur more than \$100,000 per year in extra expenses that won't go toward its primary mission of employing people in need, Carlson said.

"We don't believe that the OEMs are adequately supporting the existing law," he said.

ENFORCEMENT LACKING

Under Michigan's Electronic Waste Takeback Program that was established by the state's Natural Resources and Environmental Protection Act, manufacturers that sell new TVs and computer monitors are required to offer an electronics recycling or takeback program that's free and convenient for households and small businesses.

The program also requires manufacturers to maintain information to inform consumers on how to recycle these products and to submit annual information regarding units collected.

The problem: The law lacks enforcement measures and fails to lay out any specific volume requirements for manufacturers — allowing less environmentally conscious companies to simply support only small amounts of recycling activity, said Comprenew's Vander Kooy.

"It was a quirk that has come back to haunt us," said Steve Nobel, program coordinator for the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) Electronic Waste Takeback Program.

As OEMs phased out CRT technology, it's become more difficult to find facilities to recycle the leaded glass and other hazardous material — significantly bumping up processing costs, Nobel said. To cope with the rising costs, OEMs have drastically reduced the amount of material they process. Additional glass processing facilities are slated to come online sometime next year to handle the influx of CRTs into the waste stream, Nobel said.

But evidence also points to some manufacturers taking advantage of Michigan's lightly enforced takeback program, he said. The state suspects that OEMs are taking CRTs from Michigan to boost their volume requirements in other states with more strict recycling policies. When manufacturers reach their quota, they shut off support to Michigan programs, Nobel said.

NEW LAW

The DEQ is currently in the process of examining the law to determine its future course of action, Nobel said. In the near term, the organization is receiving feedback from a work group that operated over the summer. A new takeback program could be developed as early as 2015, Nobel said.

"It's very important that the DEQ and the state Legislature put something together very quickly to put some teeth in the law," Vander Kooy said. "We think the easiest thing to do is ban electronics from landfills and incinerators."

Currently, 25 states have Electronic Waste Takeback Programs and 20 have landfill bans in place, Vander Kooy said.

While recyclers have been busy playing catch-up with CRTs, there's also mounting concern over what could happen in the future when an influx of liquid crystal display (LCD) video systems — which contain mercury — hits the market, Nobel said.

Going forward, any revision of the state's Electronic Waste Takeback Program will need to contend with differences in new technology and their environmental implications, he said.

Electronic waste, including CRTs, is a key component the West Michigan Sustainable Business Forum is studying for the DEQ in its Waste Characterization and Valuation Project, which will examine the types of materials that are ending up in landfills throughout Michigan. The project will also look into the economic value and environmental impact of materials that are being landfilled but that could be recycled or composted.

"We're going to be providing information that will help inform the e-waste conversion and potential policy changes, including a ban," said Dan Schoonmaker, the executive director of the WMSBF. "There isn't a clear picture as to how much product is making its way into landfills. We could discover that there is relatively little volume, or a vast amount."

While an outright landfill ban may seem logical, it could pose key problems without a program in place for recyclers to process the waste profitably, said Schoonmaker, who compared the situation with electronic waste to the long-term struggle to find ways to recycle used tires.

CRTs ON THE RISE

While CRTs were expected to phase out over time as they were replaced with flatscreen displays, recycling organizations have been seeing increasing volumes of the products in recent years, sources said. For example, Goodwill of Greater Grand Rapids has seen a 3-percent increase in material volume this year.

"Our projections point to CRTs being a significant part of the waste stream for the next three years," Vander Kooy of Comprenew said.

The Kent County Department of Public Works collects electronics for recycling at its sites in Grand Rapids, Rockford and Byron Center and has seen volumes spike 6 percent year-to-date, said Kristen Wieland, the department's resource, recovery and recycling manager.

To date, the county has collected about 177 tons of electronic waste, up 6 percent from 167 tons at the same time last year, Wieland said. A significant part of that increase is related to more CRTs, she said.

While it plans to continue to offer these recycling services at no cost, the county may have to charge in the future if its collection program incurs significant costs, Wieland said.

"I think manufacturers have responsibilities to help with recycling," Weiland said. "It shouldn't fall on municipalities and nonprofits to recycle."

MANUFACTURER RESPONSIBILITY

Going forward, both Van Kooy and Carlson would like to see a fully funded and comprehensive recycling program for harmful consumer electronics that takes pressure off nonprofit organizations that collect and recycle products in the state.

"We're saying let's not make Michigan a dumping ground," Vander Kooy said. "Let's put Michigan on par with some of the other states."

Vander Kooy also hopes the conversation over CRTs will encourage manufacturers to look at engineering products for easy recyclability at the end of the product lifecycle. Standardizing plastics used in the products and cutting down on the amount of harmful chemicals throughout the production process could make a big difference, he said.

"There's a lot more that manufacturers can do," Vander Kooy said.

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