

Note: this article can be run as is, with DNR names and quotes, or customized with local information. If you have questions, contact us at DNRWAe-cycling@wisconsin.gov.

Electronics recycling fees serve a purpose

When it comes time to dispose of an old, boxy TV or a behemoth desktop computer, many Wisconsin residents know that they should not go in the trash. Most electronics have been banned from landfills since 2010 and landfills are noticing fewer electronics arriving at their gates.

Residents of most of the state can now find E-Cycle Wisconsin collection events or permanent collection sites nearby. In many cases, however, residents may be asked to pay a fee to help cover the full cost of responsibly recycling their old electronics, especially larger, old TVs.

Fees help responsible recyclers recover both the valuable and toxic materials from electronics while protecting worker safety. Electronics manufacturers do help pay for recycling in the E-Cycle Wisconsin program, but their payments do not always cover the full cost of carefully managing hazardous components.

For example, responsible electronics recyclers are facing a new and challenging problem: the leaded glass in tube TVs and monitors, which is toxic if not handled properly. Until recently, the glass was easily recycled into new tube TVs and monitors. But since most people have switched to flat-screen devices, recyclers now have to pay to send their glass to the few locations able to recycle it into something new. Often it costs a recycler more to process and recycle the glass than all of the other materials in the device are worth. To keep their businesses running, recyclers must charge a fee.

It may be tempting to bypass a registered collection site that charges a fee and give your electronics to a Craigslist contact or a backyard scrapper who will take them for free. But in doing so, you are potentially contributing to illegal dumping and pollution, in addition to making yourself vulnerable to identity theft.

“Many of the informal recyclers we have contact with had no idea what they were getting themselves into when they took electronics,” said Marcy McGrath, Department of Natural Resources E-Cycle Wisconsin compliance specialist. “They thought they would earn a quick buck but ended up paying thousands in clean-up costs.”

The costs of avoiding a recycling fee at an established collector could be much higher than people realize.

“Dumping and pollution aside, information you entered into your computer or cell phone, like credit card numbers, social security numbers and passwords, can all be accessed long after the computer or phone stops working,” McGrath said. “Simply deleting old documents does not make them disappear. You need to do a complete hard drive wipe, which many responsible electronics recyclers will do for you. Their reputation depends on it. An informal recycler generally can’t give you the same guarantee.”

Registered E-Cycle Wisconsin collectors are inspected by the DNR and send the electronics they collect to recyclers that are also registered with the program.

The DNR maintains an up-to-date list of collection sites registered with E-Cycle Wisconsin. Residents can find permanent drop-off sites and upcoming special collection events in their county. Go to dnr.wi.gov and search “ecycle” for details.

For questions contact the E-Cycle Wisconsin program at (608) 266-2111 or DNRWAcycling@wisconsin.gov