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Recycle old electronics during spring cleaning to give gadgets new life

It's the time of the year for emptying basements, cleaning out drawers and finding new homes for all the clutter that accumulated over the winter. For a growing number of Wisconsin residents, that clutter includes old electronics like computers, cell phones or TVs. State law bans most electronics from Wisconsin's landfills and incinerators.

A 2016 E-Cycle Wisconsin survey showed that Wisconsin households have an estimated 1.7 million unused TVs, 2.1 million unused computers, and 4.2 million unused cell phones. You can recycle old, unwanted or non-functioning household electronics at one of the nearly 400 E-Cycle Wisconsin collection sites around the state. Many items are accepted for no charge. Current market conditions have caused collectors to charge for some items that are more difficult to recycle, especially TVs and monitors that contain lead or mercury.

Electronics can contain harmful materials like lead, mercury and other heavy metals, as well as chemical flame retardants. When disposed of improperly, these pollutants can pose a risk to human and environmental health.

Electronics also contain valuable reusable materials, including steel, gold, silver, copper and plastic. Properly recycling these materials reduces the need for mining new materials.

"Electronics are resources that are too valuable to waste, and we can help both our economy and the environment by recycling them," said Sarah Murray, E-Cycle Wisconsin program coordinator. "They do nothing for us in landfills."

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," Murray said. "Simply deleting old documents does not make them disappear. You need to do a complete memory wipe, which many responsible electronics recyclers will do for you."

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. Many sites accept electronics for free, though some may charge a fee for some items. Go to dnr.wi.gov and search "e-cycle" for details.

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

The following electronics are banned from Wisconsin landfills and incinerators

- Computers (desktop, laptop, netbook and tablet computers)
- Desktop printers (including those that scan, fax and/or copy)
- Monitors
- Televisions
- Cell phones
- E-readers
- DVD players, VCRs and DVRs
- Fax machines
- Computer mice and keyboards
- Other computer accessories (such as hard drives, speakers, flash drives and modems)