

Recycling Facts



Photo courtesy of Lower East Side Ecology Center

The Facts: Recycling Electronics

The New York City Council is considering Intro. 104, the Electronic Equipment Recycling and Reuse Act, which would require manufacturers of consumer electronics to recycle products they've sold when buyers are looking to discard them. Here's an overview of the bill and why environmental and consumer groups and the recycling industry support it.

This fact sheet has been prepared by the Natural Resources Defense Council. For more information on NRDC or the consumers electronic recycling campaign, contact us at 212-727-4536 or visit www.nrdc.org.

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If you're like many New Yorkers, there's a good chance you've got a computer from years past lurking under your desk, or a TV that's on the fritz. Or maybe you still own an older version of a digital music player, now tucked away in a drawer in favor of the latest iPod. And when it comes time to dispose of these ineffectual electronics, tossing them on the street remains your cheapest and easiest option.

That may all change if Intro. 104 becomes law later this year. With the support of Consumers Union and a broad coalition of environmental groups, Council Members Michael McMahon and Bill de Blasio proposed a bill that could:

1. give New Yorkers a convenient way to recycle their unwanted TVs, computers, computer monitors and portable digital music players; and
2. ultimately reduce the prevalence of toxic material in everyday electronic items.

Why recycle consumer electronic products?

Toxic materials in common household electronic products include:

- lead, a probable human carcinogen. Used in the cathode-ray tubes of TV and computer monitors;
- mercury, which can damage the nervous system. Used in lighting devices for flat panel displays;
- barium oxide, which causes brain swelling and muscle weakness, among other symptoms. It is also used in CRTs;
- vinyl chloride, a known human carcinogen. Used in plastic computer housings, keyboards and cables. Exposure can occur from breathing vinyl chloride that has been released from hazardous waste sites and landfills.

Left undisturbed, these materials pose no danger to consumers. But when burned or dumped—as happens to most of New York City's unwanted electronics—these toxins threaten our air and water.

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How would a New York City law work?

The New York City bill promotes Extended Producer Responsibility, which requires electronics manufacturers to take their products back for recycling once the consumer is done with them.

The council bill provides strong incentives for manufacturers to reduce the amount of toxins in their products, since they would be held accountable for recycling them. While completely eliminating toxic substances from consumer electronics may take a long time, manufacturers would have motivation to limit the use of harmful substances and instead find functional alternatives.

What's done in other places?

Connecticut, Maine, Minnesota, North Carolina, Oregon, Texas and Washington have already passed producer responsibility laws and many other cities and states are considering similar legislation.

In Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and European Union, manufacturers already take responsibility for recycling discarded electronic products.

Passage of a New York City law, with the millions of electronic products sold here annually, would help reduce the presence of toxic substances permeating our biosphere and environment.

How would unwanted electronics be collected?

Intro. 104 doesn't dictate how unwanted electronics products would be collected. Manufacturers would be free to set up their own collection and recycling systems, and they would be rewarded for donating reusable computers for use by schools and low-income families.

What other recycling options are available?

Right now, the only options available to New Yorkers looking to dispose of used electronics are taking them to neighborhood recycling programs, storing them at exorbitant costs, or simply tossing them into the garbage.

1. Products covered by the bill (TVs, computers, monitors, and portable digital music players) contain toxic substances that are dangerous when landfilled or burned.

2. Intro. 104 provides strong incentives for manufacturers to reduce use of toxics, which are costly to recycle. It will also reduce New York City's solid waste burden.

3. Electronic manufacturers are already taking responsibility for recycling their own products in Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and European countries, even as some object to U.S. legislation like Intro. 104.

4. Intro. 104 has broad support from consumer groups, environmental organizations, and the recycling industry. *Similar bills in other cities and states have won support from retailers* because they don't have to collect a "recycling fee" from consumers.

As an alternative to the proposed City Council bill, some manufacturers are pushing for laws mandating an Advanced Recovery Fee, or ARF. In a system adopted by California, ARF requires retailers to collect a fee when they sell a TV or computer, which they then send on to the government. Those fees go toward the establishment and operation of government-run electronics recycling programs.

This approach penalizes both customer and seller. City retailers would have to charge higher prices than suburban competitors. And the money raised may not meet the costs of the ARF program.

In the end, charging a tack-on ARF will not affect what hazardous materials go into a television since the manufacturer is essentially released from fiscal liability for recycling it.

Shouldn't there be federal standards?

Yes. But Congress is unlikely to act in the near future. A ground-breaking New York City bill could set the standard for national legislation.

When would a new law take effect?

If the council passes and the mayor signs a bill this year, manufacturers will first design their collection plans. Collections could start in 2009.

Electronics picked up by NYC Sanitation:

21,840 tons annually
(DOS report, 2005)

Number of TVs, computer, and covered accessories purchased annually in U.S.

233 million
(Source: U.S. Environmental Protection Agency)

Percentage of lead in landfills that may come from discarded electronics:

40%
(Source: U.S. EPA)

Average household spending on consumer electronics:

1975: \$84
2005: \$1,251
(Source: Consumer Electronics Association)

Year digital TV broadcasts required by FCC, making analog TVs obsolete:

2009

