

High Tech's Dark Side - A look back to 2002

Two bills tackle recycling of electronic waste

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One of the byproducts of technological change isn't all that pretty or good for the environment: the growing mountain of electronics made obsolete by this year's newest hot gadget. Once discarded, computer monitors, videocassette recorders and televisions become simply high-tech cousins to worn-out tires and auto batteries, potentially hazardous trash not at all suitable for the normal recycling process.

Now come two bills introduced to the state Senate that would set up special programs for recycling the tons of electronics Californians toss out each year. One bill, sponsored by Sen. Byron Sher, D-Palo Alto, would require retailers to collect a fee on every cathode ray tube (CRT) device, such as a computer monitor or television, that they sell, beginning in July 2003. Those fees would be used to fund a recycling program for CRTs, which contain high amounts of lead that can leach into landfills and eventually nearby water supplies. State regulations already prohibit the dumping of CRTs into landfills.

A second bill, sponsored by Sen. Gloria Romero, D-Los Angeles, would require electronics makers to label what hazardous materials have gone into their devices and to set up recycling programs at no cost to consumers, or pay the state to recycle the devices. That law would take effect in January 2004. While the Sher bill focuses on lead-laden CRTs, the Romero bill includes a wide variety of electronics, including hand-held computers and VCRs, as well as computers. Both bills address a growing concern in California about the problems of safely disposing of the thousands of tons of electronics that grow obsolete every year.



The state already has similar programs that govern the disposal of tires and auto batteries. "We're really pleased that we have what look like two good bills in the Legislature," said Ted Smith, executive director of the Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition, a watchdog group that monitors toxic materials produced by the technology industry. It's unclear how much such a program might add to the cost of electronic devices. The Sher bill doesn't specify how large a fee would be levied by retailers. And manufacturers would likely add to the price of their products the cost of mandatory recycling required in the Romero bill.

Not everyone is thrilled by the legislation. Mark Albertson, senior vice president of the American Electronics Association, said his organization prefers market-based approaches rather than government mandates. "The debate is how voluntary this will be vs. some form of government regulation," said Albertson, whose organization represents 3,600 electronics companies nationwide. He declined to predict whether the AEA would oppose the measures until they were studied further and members had been consulted.

According to the California Integrated Waste Management Board, more than 6 million obsolete CRTs are stored in California and more than 6,000 computers become obsolete in the state every day.

In addition to the high levels of lead in CRTs, most electronic devices contain significant amounts of toxic materials such as mercury and cadmium.



And they are expensive and inconvenient to recycle. Though Sacramento County just opened a recycling station for e-waste in the north area, such public facilities are scarce.

Private companies such as Hewlett-Packard and IBM have started recycling programs, but they typically charge \$30 or more to recycle PCs. The county will accept two electronic items and charge by weight for standard waste, but then will charge \$20 per electronic item beyond that.