

Electronic waste diversion vital next step for Ontario

PAUL LACHINE/NEWSART

Metals in old TVs and computers pose threat to health and environment

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GLENDA GIES

Ontario is on the brink of entering the next stage of environmental responsibility.

The McGuinty government is considering the new Ontario Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment (WEEE) diversion program. Although some critics have expressed reservations, we look forward to the government taking this last step. Our environment is depending on it.



Consider that an estimated 91,000 tonnes of computers, monitors, printers, fax machines and televisions are generated each year in Ontario. The current collection rate of these materials for proper reuse or recycling is a disappointingly low 27 per cent.

Some of these old electronics are no doubt piling up in garages, basements, and attics of homes all over the province – a problem in its own right that the WEEE program will most definitely help address.

But most of the remaining electronic waste is now either being dumped in U.S. and Ontario landfills, or worse, it is being exported to overseas locations with unknown environmental and human health implications.

Under normal usage, electrical and electronic equipment poses little or no hazard. However, many electronic products contain materials such as lead, cadmium and mercury, which if not handled properly could have environmental impacts and raise health and safety concerns.

The program will implement vendor qualification requirements, including the first WEEE reuse standard in North America, to ensure electronics are processed in a

safe and environmentally sound manner that satisfies local, provincial, national and international obligations. The safe handling and proper management of electronic products at the end of their life is crucial. Sending end-of-life electronics to landfill or out of the county must be stopped.

Clearly, the current system is not working. If Ontario is to become a leader in environmental stewardship, it must provide a solution that drastically improves the reuse and recycling amounts of waste electronics. The WEEE program is just that solution.

Waste Diversion Ontario (WDO) developed the WEEE program over the past year in co-operation with Ontario Electronic Stewardship (OES). The program is based on the principles of extended producer responsibility set out by the minister of the environment.

To produce the best program possible for Ontario, WDO has incorporated some of the best practices of similar programs in other Canadian provinces and countries. As well, consultations have been held with stakeholders across Ontario. The result is a comprehensive program that will consist of multiple phases.

The first phase addresses desktop and portable computers, computer peripherals, monitors, printers, fax machines and televisions.

A plan for second phase materials, such as phones, cameras and audiovisual equipment, will follow 12 months after approval of the first phase. Additional phases to recover a broader range of material could follow.

Ontarians have shown themselves willing to recycle when they're given the opportunity. The WEEE Program has been designed for success by giving Ontarians hundreds of additional locations and opportunities to have their old electronics collected for reuse or recycling. While there are now just 167 collection sites across the province, within five years that number will increase to more than 650.

The program will ensure accessibility for all Ontarians in all regions. Accessibility will be supported through special collection events hosted by retailers, municipalities or OES.

Collection locations will include reuse organizations, second-hand organizations, charities providing household collection of used items, municipalities, waste management and recycling companies, as well as mobile events where required.

This will increase collection rates to more than 60 per cent while ensuring that e-waste is managed in Ontario or in jurisdictions with equivalent environmental, health and safety standards.

To take advantage of these additional collection opportunities, Ontarians must know that they exist. OES will promote the program and provide information about where householders and businesses that have unwanted electrical and electronic equipment can take it. The promotion program will include advertisements and a special website that will contain information that will be searchable by postal code.

The WEEE program will be managed by OES, a not-for-profit organization established by Waste Diversion Ontario and comprised of manufacturers and

importers. OES will collect approximately \$62 million in program fees from brand owners, first importers and assemblers of these electrical and electronic products in the first year of operation.

All fees collected will go toward covering the program's direct costs of collection, transportation, consolidation, processing and administration. Funds also will be used for research and development and continuous improvements in technology and program execution.

The government of Ontario will not receive any revenue and the entire program will be transparent and audited annually. Each individual producer must make its own decision on whether to cover the fees out of its profit margin or to pass some or all of the cost to the consumer.

The WEEE program makes brand owners and importers fully responsible for increasing accessibility, and achieving collection, reuse and recycling targets. It sets rigorous targets to ensure that e-waste is being managed in a responsible manner.

Most importantly, the program shifts the costs of managing waste electronics from the property taxpayer and Ontario businesses to the producers of the electronic items.

The Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment diversion program uses the polluter pays principle to achieve responsible reuse and recycling targets and will keep more e-waste from our landfill sites. It puts the onus on manufacturers, importers, consumers and government to take responsibility for making Ontario a healthier place.

This program has used in its design the best elements of similar programs across Canada and around the world. It is time for Ontario to take the next step.

Glenda Gies is executive director of Waste Diversion Ontario.