



# E-WASTE

### Electronics product stewardship: a made-in-BC solution

**ISSUE:** Thirty-six thousand tonnes of electronic products (TVs, computers, printers, cell phones, etc.) were discarded by Canadians in 1999. According to Environment Canada, annual discards of “e-waste” will almost double to more than 71,000 tonnes in 2005. Toxic materials such as lead, mercury, cadmium fire-retardant chemicals and arsenic are used in the components of these devices. They pose a serious risk to human health and the environment if inappropriately disposed of, landfilled, or incinerated.

**BACKGROUND:** The growth and rapid advancements in consumer electronics technology, particularly in the computer sector, are major factors in the growing volumes of “e-waste”. The computer industry’s current benchmark for up-to-date performance is as short as 18 months. Technology advances so quickly that last year’s model may not run this year’s software, necessitating replacement with an ever-increasing frequency by personal and business users alike. It is common accounting practice to write-off computer components over a three-year period and many firms replace entire computer systems on that basis.

Consumer product manufacturers continue to place a greater emphasis on performance and price than on designs that enhance end-of-life management. As a result, society is left with a growing stockpile of toxic discards. Office storage rooms, family basements and even the yards of recyclers are filling up with electronic products that were introduced into the marketplace with no plan for their end of life.

**CURRENT PRACTICES:** A significant amount of e-waste is being sent offshore to developing nations where it is managed in a manner considered completely unacceptable in North America (see pictures at [www.rcbc.bc.ca](http://www.rcbc.bc.ca)). Worker safety, child protection and environmental standards are non-existent or not enforced. Some overseas countries have now closed their borders to e-waste in an effort to preserve their own environments and protect communities. This compounds the increasing amount of e-waste requiring management in North America.

There is an emerging electronics recycling industry in North America, but it is still inadequate to deal with the backlog (one billion computers had been sold world-wide by July 2002) or with the coming tide of e-waste (a second billion will be sold in the next 5 years). As a result much of the e-waste generated remains in stockpile while practical and profitable methods of recycling are under development.

Managing e-waste is an expensive process since dismantling a product not designed for recycling is time and labour intensive. To limit these costs, many North American recyclers have turned to sheltered workshops for the developmentally disabled or prison labour rather than market labour. This may be seen as a transitional measure, but a more sustainable solution is needed to deal with the volumes being generated.

**FUTURE DIRECTION:** RCBC works with consumers, industry and regulators alike to find practical solutions on issues such as e-waste. Brand owners have now been made aware: stakeholders expect industry to take responsibility and act as stewards for their products from cradle to cradle. In response, industry has put forward product stewardship proposals while seeking input from RCBC. A young electronics recycling industry is emerging and is being promoted through the RCBC Recycling Hotline. The BC provincial government is preparing an "Extended Producer Responsibility" regulation for e-waste and has consulted with RCBC to assist in its development. The regulation is expected to become law by the end of 2004, ensuring brand owners will take full responsibility for their products' collection and management within an environmentally sound recycling program. This regulated responsibility puts the incentive squarely on manufacturers to design products that can be easily recycled. BC's e-waste regulation, the first of its kind in the world, is expected to follow the framework for other established product stewardship programs in BC: government regulated, but producer-managed and funded.

**WHAT YOU CAN DO:**

Consumers, retailers, environmentalists, governments, product makers and recyclers are all represented within RCBC. The Council continues to facilitate the solving of complex environmental issues, as it has since its inception 30 years ago, by providing a wide range of diverse interests with a constructive and respectful forum for discussion.

The best way to ensure you keep on top of the latest developments in this area and have your voice heard is to join RCBC. You will receive RCBC's Winter/Spring 2004 Newsletter with a comprehensive look at e-waste management. And, by being a member of RCBC, whether you are an electronics consumer, a retailer, a recycler or a brand owner, you will become part of the made-in-BC Canadian solution to the global e-waste problem.

**For more information see these web sites**

Ministry of WLAP, <http://wlapwww.gov.bc.ca/epd/index.html>

RCBC [www.rcbc.bc.ca/hot/ewasteframe.htm](http://www.rcbc.bc.ca/hot/ewasteframe.htm)

**Or call**

RCBC Hotline at 604-732-9253 or 1-800-667-4321

This document was produced in February 2004. It was developed with the assistance of RCBC's E-waste Working Group whose members represent consumers, industry, government and environmental perspectives on electronics recycling.

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**RCBC Mission Statement**

RCBC is a multi-sectoral non-profit organization working towards waste avoidance. We support waste management solutions by conducting research, facilitating the exchange of ideas and providing information services.

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