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## Recycling: Tech Trash, E-Waste: By Any Name, It's an Issue

Newsweek

Dec. 12, 2005 issue - This holiday season, American consumers will buy millions of videogame consoles, MP3 players, digital cameras and computers. The booming business is great for retailers, the high-tech industry and the U.S. economy—and potentially disastrous for the environment. Most consumers will eventually send their old, obsolete gear to landfills, where decaying circuit boards and PC screens could leak toxic substances like mercury, lead and chromium.

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Remember when recycling just meant putting aluminum cans in the blue bin? For lawmakers, environmentalists and retailers today, recycling means solving the quandary known as e-waste. The EPA estimates that Americans discard 2 million tons of tech trash each year; U.S. homes and businesses alone dispose of 133,000 PCs each day, according to research firm Gartner. While the EPA considers only old cathode-ray-tube TVs and PC screens to be hazardous, devices like printers have failed toxicity tests in states with more-stringent standards, like California, which is set next February to make it illegal to dump any kind of tech waste in landfills. "What consumers maybe don't recognize, and what public-health officials are finally starting to recognize, is that all electronic devices, not just computer monitors and televisions, contain hazardous levels of toxic material," says Mark Murray, of Californians Against Waste.

Some high-tech companies like HP and Dell already offer to take back

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their old products. But what they really fear is a patchwork of inconsistent local laws that will handicap them against foreign competition. Currently, three states have slightly different e-waste rules. California adds a recycling fee to the purchase price of all new tech items. Beginning next month, Maine and Maryland will require manufacturers to take back their goods without charging consumers. Meanwhile, dozens of states and even localities like New York City are considering e-recycling legislation. Rick Goss, director of Environmental Affairs for the high-tech trade group Electronic Industries Alliance, says that "a confusion of conflicting state and local laws across the country will only increase compliance costs, which will ultimately be passed down to the consumer."

The industry prefers a single, federal bill, like the European Union laws that go into effect next year requiring tech companies to take back their products and reduce the amount of hazardous materials they use. The House of Representatives held hearings on the issue in July—but few expect new legislation from a Congress that would view such a law as a new tax on companies. So in most parts of the country this holiday season, it will be up to consumers to find credentialed recyclers. Think of it as a gift to Mother Nature.

—Brad Stone

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