

Campaign targets computer makers

by Greg Turner
News Business Writer

Three years ago, Massachusetts became the first state to ban the disposal of electronic equipment containing cathode ray tubes into landfills and incinerators.

The law, which went into effect just before Earth Day in April 2000, was designed to stem the tide of toxic trash - called "e-waste" - as more and more computer equipment becomes obsolete.

The average cathode ray tube (CRT), which also can be found in many televisions, contains 5 to 8 pounds of lead, which can seep into groundwater under landfills or pollute the air if burned.

But that law has created what some call an unfunded mandate for Massachusetts' cities and towns, which have had to pick up the cost of recycling CRTs through community recycling programs.

Now, some in the state want to take the law a step further and force the companies that make and sell such equipment to recover their products once they reach the point of obsolescence. The mechanism, currently a bill before the Legislature, would require manufacturers to submit a collection system plan to the state Department of Environmental Protection. The law would cover CRTs as well as many other computer products including keyboards, printers and cables.

"The key is that the plan can impose no cost on any city, town, county or the commonwealth," said Kara Reeve, a campaign organizer at Clean Water Action in Boston. "It really is a cost-saving measure for cities and towns in Massachusetts, which at this point are financially strapped because of the budget crisis."

Rep. Mark Carron, D-Southbridge, filed the bill last year but the legislature session expired before a vote was taken. He re-filed the bill this year and it is now before the Joint Natural Resources Committee. A hearing on the issue is scheduled for May 15 at the State House.

Recyclers target computer makers, "e-waste" stream

More than 275 communities have set up collection programs, many of which charge a fee to defray the cost of recycling CRTs. Carron estimates that the law, if passed, could save cities and towns up to \$21 million a year, based on current CRT recycling rates, and could spur an increase in recycling enterprises.

"What's available for people for responsible recovery of their old computer technology is just not convenient," he said. "It's just not an ongoing outlet."

The bill has garnered support from other lawmakers as well as 125 cities and towns whose leaders have passed resolutions backing the proposal.

"That's more than a third of the state," said Reeve. "That's huge to get that amount of support behind any piece of legislation."

Critics say the legislation would be like making automakers recover the cars they have assembled and sold before they hit the junkyard, but the so-called producer take-back initiative has already gained a foothold in Europe.

In the United States, a grassroots effort called the Computer TakeBack Campaign has been working for nearly two years to convince computer makers to change their ways. The group is backing proposed legislation in nearly two dozen states that would put the onus -



Greg Conigliaro, president of Conigliaro Industries, stands by a box of old computers outside the Framingham recycling services company. Staff Photo by Ken McGagh

and the cost - of recycling on corporations.

"If the companies aren't going to do it, we'd like to see some public policy in place to shift the burden," said David Wood, director of the Wisconsin-based Grassroots Recycling Network, one of 20 state and national organizations involved with the Computer TakeBack Campaign.

The groups hope that if manufacturers are forced to take on the burden of collecting their used products, the companies will design them with fewer toxic or hazardous materials to save on recycling costs.

The problem of e-waste is only going to get worse, Wood says. According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, an estimated 250 million computers are destined to become obsolete by 2005.

In June 2001, the EPA launched an effort called the National Electronics Product Stewardship Initiative (NEPSI) to try to develop a national financing system to maximize the reuse and recycling of old PCs and TVs. Stakeholders include government officials, environmental groups and industry representatives.

The leaders in domestic PC sales, Texas-based Dell Computers and Hewlett Packard Co. in California, prefer a system created with industry input rather than one imposed by governments.

"We're willing to discuss and talk with officials about what Dell is doing and how we can help. In the end, whatever is passed we would adhere to," said Dell spokeswoman Michele Glaze. "But we are very interested in trying to have industry solutions before there are government solutions."

With the NEPSI initiative still unresolved, computer manufacturers themselves are taking steps to improve their own recycling systems. Both Dell and HP offer fee-based recycling services to customers.

"Dell has really stepped up to the plate to provide easy and affordable recycling programs for our customers," Glaze said.

Last month, Dell Recycling started offering a home pickup service, which charges \$15 per unit weighing up to 50 pounds. Participants can put an old computer, printer or monitor in a box and, through Dell's Web site, arrange for an Airborne Express pickup.

Under a separate program, Dell customers can return their old printer in a box of the new printer they buy - at no extra cost.

"So recycling for the very first time has been built into a product offer," said Jennifer Jones, a Dell spokeswoman. "It's not a promotion, so it's here to stay."

Hewlett-Packard offers a recycling service with a cost range of \$13 - \$34 depending on the type of unit. UPS handles the pickups. HP also started an e-coupon program that rewards customers who recycle with a \$50 coupon toward a new product. In April, in honor of Earth Day, HP is doubling the amount of the coupon.

"We want to be a part of the solution to manage this e-waste that's out there," said Chris Altobell, an HP spokesman. "As long as they're paying their way, we want to make it available to them."

Greg Conigliaro knows how the CRT ban has affected recycling rates. His company, Conigliaro Industries in Framingham, is one of several Massachusetts firms that process e-waste.

"We're seeing a lot more than before the regulations were on the books," Conigliaro said, noting the emerging popularity of flat-screen LCD monitors. "We're processing close to a thousand units a week of CRTs." That's equivalent to 35,000 pounds, or enough to load a truck trailer "full to the brim" with monitors, he said.

Most monitors are not reusable; they've been discarded after they've broken down for good. Conigliaro recycles the plastic parts to make two products: Plas-Crete blocks that can be used for retaining walls, and Boston's Best Patch, a mix of recycled plastic, sand and emulsion, used to fill potholes.

The rest of the material, including the glass and power cords, is sent out to other companies for recycling. In the end, about 95 percent of a monitor is recycled.

Conigliaro is wary of the producer responsibility bill, saying it could take away some of his business and increase competition. But he credits the current CRT law as helping get the job done. "It's a good example of how regulations can target a material and get it out of the waste stream quickly," he said. "People don't mind paying the fee to get rid of it."

Carron believes more must be done to reduce e-waste and lift a burden off of taxpayers. He said his bill is "wide open," with computer makers able to use existing recycling collection systems or expand the infrastructure. That could help recycling companies "flourish," he said.

"It's meant to be a good business, good consumer taxpayer bill. If looked at intelligently, you'll find it has all these aspects," Carron said. "We're working on it and we're committed to the effort."



701 Waverly Street, Framingham, MA 01702

(888) CONIG - 25, fax (508) 653-6672

sales@conigliaro.com — www.conigliaro.com