

Why Recycle Cell Phones? Cellphone Recycling Fact Sheet

Background

- In the US, cell phone use has surged from 340,000 subscribers in 1985 to over 215 million in June, 2006.
- The average American cell phone user owns 2 or more cell phones.
- The average wireless user upgrades their cell phone every 18 months.
- It is estimated that more than 140 million cell phones are retired each year and over 500 million cell phones are currently stockpiled in US homes.
- It is estimated that up to 75 percent of obsolete cell phones are stockpiled in drawers by people who don't know what else to do with them.

Toxicity

- The circuit boards in cell phones contain myriad toxins such as arsenic, antimony, beryllium, cadmium, copper, lead, mercury, nickel, and zinc.
- Brominated flame retardants are found in the plastic housing, printed wiring board, and cables.
- The lithium-ion and nickel-metal hydride batteries contain heavy metals such as cobalt, zinc, and copper.
- Many of these chemicals are Persistent Bioaccumulative Toxins (PBTs) and have the potential to be released into the air and groundwater when burned in incinerators or disposed of in landfills, thus creating unnecessary threats to human health and the environment.
- Preliminary testing by the California Department of Toxic Substances Control has shown that cell phones are likely to be determined hazardous at end-of-life and will require management under Universal Waste regulations.
- Universal Wastes must be recycled or managed as hazardous waste. Disposal at an unauthorized site or landfill is a serious crime as well as a serious environmental threat.
- Additional research by Dr. Timothy Townsend of the University of Florida for the US EPA has also found cell phones to leach hazardous levels of lead when disposed in landfill conditions.

Legislative

- The State of California considers cell phones hazardous waste.
- Effective October 1, 2005 it is unlawful to discard a cell phone in household trash in King County, WA.
- Effective February 9, 2006 it is unlawful to discard a cell phone in household trash in the State of California.
- Effective June 1, 2006 it is unlawful to discard a cell phone in household trash in Westchester County, NY.
- Effective July 1, 2006 it is unlawful for a retailer to sell a cell phone in the State of California unless they have a cell phone recycling program in place.
- Effective January 1, 2007 it is unlawful for a retailer to sell a cell phone in the State of New York unless they have a cell phone recycling program in place.

Recycling

- Over 70% of Americans do not know that they can recycle their old cell phone.
- Less than 5% of obsolete cell phones are refurbished or recycled.
- In a recent survey, only **2.3% of Americans recycled** their old cell phones and **7% threw them in the garbage.**
- Cell phone manufacturers and service providers have voluntarily implemented recycling programs and recognize that retail 'take-back' of old phones represents the lowest cost

- and most convenient recycling model.
- Unfortunately, these programs are not well advertised and inconsistent – only a fraction of retail cell phone outlets are currently providing their customers with recycling options.
- Of those who turned in their old cell phone to their service provider, only 18% were offered recycling as an option.
- Surveys suggest that 90% of Americans would recycle their cell phone if there was a convenient drop-off location at a store near them.
- Cell phones, unlike TVs, have a **positive scrap value** meaning the value of cell phone reuse is currently sufficient to finance the collection and recycling infrastructure.
- In a recent telephone survey of wireless retailers, 20% instructed the caller to throw their old cell phone away.

Fun Facts

The cell phones retired each year...

- ...if laid end to end would stretch from NY to LA 6.6 times.
- ...would fill 199 boxcars.
- ...would feed school lunch to the 12 million **food insecure** (either hungry or unsure of where their next meal would come from) American children for 43 days.
- ...weigh more than 174 space shuttles.
- ...would pay the salaries of members of Congress for over 15 years.
- ...would pay the budget of the City of Sacramento, CA for nearly two years.
- ...would buy every man woman and child in the United States two double cheeseburgers and a medium coke at McDonalds...and \$1 change.