

The 'Universal Waste' Disposal Ban

A Financial Crisis for California's Local Governments

In February 2006 a statewide ban went into effect in California that makes it illegal for households and small businesses to put certain hazardous products in the trash. The products banned from the trash – called **Universal Waste**, or **U-waste** – include batteries, fluorescent lights and many electronic products. Local governments were charged with enforcing the ban and were expected to provide collection services.

Universal Waste Products are Toxic

Most **consumer electronics** pose a threat to public health and the environment because they contain lead, cadmium and a host of other toxic heavy metals. **Fluorescent lamps** and **thermostats** contain mercury, a potent neurotoxin. Even **household alkaline batteries**, which contain corrosive chemicals, are hazardous when millions accumulate and leak in landfills.

How Much U-Waste is in California?

A 2001 study commissioned by the California Integrated Waste Management Board calculated that almost **600 million small batteries** and **more than 17 million fluorescent lamps** would be sold – and a similar number thrown out – in California in 2006. More than a **quarter million tons of hazardous electronics** not covered by SB20 are discarded every year.

U-Waste Type	Projected 2006 Sales
Fluorescent Lamps	17,444,444 lamps
Batteries	593,864,218 batteries
Thermostats	365,282 thermostats
SOURCE: CIWMB, 2002, Household Universal Waste Generation in California	

Hazardous Electronics in California Not Covered by SB-20	
Computer-related Electronics (<i>key boards, laptops, mice, disk drives, printers</i>)	119,917 tons
Other small consumer electronics (<i>portable non-computer related electronics: PDAs, cell phones, camcorders, digital cameras, etc.</i>)	93,273 tons
Brown Goods (<i>larger, non portable electronics: microwaves, stereos, VCRs, DVDs, etc.</i>)	41,394 tons
Total Non-SB20 Electronics	254,584 tons
Source: CIWMB 2004, Statewide Waste Characterization Study	

The Cost to Local Government is Staggering

- San Luis Obispo County calculated that the current annual budget of \$300,000 for collecting household hazardous products would have to **increase to \$4 million** to collect and manage the items now subject to the disposal ban.
- The City of San Francisco anticipates that its additional costs to enforce the U-waste ban will **exceed \$5 million** per year.
- The 2001 CIWMB study calculated that 32 jurisdictions participating in the survey would need to spend an **additional \$41 million** to manage just three U-waste product categories (fluorescent lamps, batteries and thermostats). Extended to the entire state, the cost to manage these three product categories would be **\$72 million**.
- The survey did not include the largest category – electronics not covered by SB20 – and a range of other products for which programs are currently inadequate or lacking. The cost of managing all banned U-waste in California could be **far greater than \$72 million**.

Local Governments Do Not Have the Resources or Capacity to Effectively Manage Toxic U-Waste Products

Nor should they.

Local governments have no control over product design, or over what products are sold in the state that will become waste. Managing toxic products at end of life is a subsidy to product manufacturers that enables the continued production of toxic products designed for the dump.

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