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Recycle electronics instead of trashing them this holiday season

The holidays often bring new electronic toys—the latest TVs, smartphones, tablets and more. When you find that shiny new gadget under the tree, you may want to get rid of some of your old electronics gathering dust.

A 2021 Department of Natural Resources survey found Wisconsin households have an estimated 1.3 million unused TVs, 2.2 million unused computers, and 4.1 million unused cellphones. Under Wisconsin’s electronics recycling law, these and many other electronics cannot be put in the trash.

You can recycle old, unwanted or non-functioning household electronics at one of the nearly 400 E-Cycle Wisconsin collection sites around the state. For smaller devices, many manufacturers provide free trade-in or mail-back recycling programs.

Many electronics contain harmful materials like mercury, lead, cadmium and other heavy metals, as well as chemical flame retardants. When disposed of improperly, these pollutants can pose a risk to human and environmental health. Lithium-ion batteries in electronics can also cause fires if not handled properly during recycling.

Electronics also contain valuable, reusable materials, including steel, plastic, gold, silver, copper and glass. More than 90% of the materials in most electronics can be recycled or reused. Properly recycling these materials reduces the need for new raw materials.

“Electronics are resources that are too valuable to waste, and we can help both our economy and the environment by recycling them,” said Sarah Murray, E-Cycle Wisconsin program coordinator for the DNR.

E-Cycle Wisconsin collectors may ask customers to pay a fee for some electronics, especially TVs and monitors. This fee will help cover the cost of recycling toxic or low-value materials in the device while keeping workers safe. While electronics manufacturers help fund electronics recycling, their payments do not always fully cover the cost of responsible collection and recycling. It may be up to you, the consumer, to cover the difference.

The costs of avoiding a recycling fee at a responsible collector could be much higher than people realize. “Dumping and pollution aside, information you entered into your computer or cell phone, like credit card numbers, social security numbers and passwords, can be accessed long after the device stops working,” Murray said. “Simply deleting old documents does not make them disappear. You need to do a complete memory wipe, which many responsible electronics recyclers will do for you.”

The DNR maintains an up-to-date list of collection sites, upcoming collection events and free mail-back programs registered with E-Cycle Wisconsin. Go to dnr.wi.gov and search “ecycle” for details..