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Recycle old electronics during spring cleaning to give gadgets new life

It's the time of the year for emptying basements, cleaning out drawers and finding new homes for all the clutter that accumulated over the winter. For most Wisconsin residents, that clutter includes old electronics like computers, cellphones or TVs.

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. Many were storing these unwanted devices because they weren't sure what to do with them.

While it may be tempting to toss old phones in the trash with the rest of the basement junk, or haul the TV to the curb, state law bans most electronics from Wisconsin's landfills and incinerators. Instead, residents can use E-Cycle Wisconsin to recycle electronics at more than 400 locations around the state.

"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 coordinator for the DNR.

Recycling your electronics is important because they contain valuable materials, including plastics, steel, glass and precious metals like gold and copper. More than 90% of the materials in most electronics can be recycled or reused.

Many devices also contain harmful materials such as lead, mercury, cadmium, chromium and chemical flame retardants. If disposed of improperly, these pollutants can harm human health and the environment. Lithium-ion batteries in electronics can also cause fires if not handled properly during recycling.

Many collection sites charge a fee to help cover the full cost of responsibly recycling some electronics, especially TVs and monitors. Electronics manufacturers help pay for recycling under E-Cycle Wisconsin, but their payments do not always cover the full cost of collection and recycling.

The costs of avoiding a recycling fee at a registered collector could be much higher than people realize. Information stored on computers, cellphones, printers and other devices, like credit card numbers, social security numbers and passwords, can be accessed long after the device stops working. Responsible recyclers protect personal data by handling recycled electronics securely and destroying or wiping hard drives and other memory.

"As more and more of our devices contain data, it's important to do some planning before you recycled old devices," Murray said. "Take time to do a factory reset if that's an option, make sure you've disconnected from cloud services or apps that store payment information. And choose a responsible recycler."

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..

The following electronics are banned from Wisconsin landfills and incinerators:

- televisions;
- computers (desktop, laptop, netbook and tablet computers);
- desktop printers (including those that scan, fax and/or copy and 3-D printers);
- computer monitors;
- other computer accessories (including keyboards, mice, speakers, external hard drives and flash drives);
- e-readers;
- DVD players, VCRs and other video players (i.e., DVRs);
- fax machines; and
- cellphones.