



Uncle Sam sez throw your TV away

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Used to be that consumer products had something called "planned obsolescence" built into them; they were designed to wear out and be thrown away (partly explaining our nation's overflowing landfills). Now, it seems, President Bush and Congress are helping speed the solid waste crisis, giving us something corporate America likes even better: "legislated obsolescence," or "enforced consumption." By any name, it may produce a tidal wave of trash.

As of February 17, 2009, the federal government has ordered the shutting down of all U.S. analog television broadcasting signals (a standard since the 1950's), to be replaced by a digital-only signal.

The necessity of this move is dubious, since both types of signals have been simultaneously broadcast for years. But the impact is clear. Everyone who currently receives a broadcast signal over the airwaves must either buy a new digital High-Definition television (HDTV starts at about \$400), or buy a \$50 to \$70 converter box, for which the government will rebate \$40. Otherwise your old analog TV goes black.

The movers and shakers behind this bill are not consumers (who never clamored for HDTV), but the consumer electronics industry, whose sales will be boosted by the law.

Conservative commentator George Will calls the bipartisan HDTV legislation "the no couch potato left behind" bill, and sees it as a noxious government entitlement program. Liberals question potentially undemocratic federal plans to sell off valuable analog public airwaves to private telecommunications companies.

However, the biggest loser to the great HDTV switchover could be our environment. Solid waste managers worry that consumers will opt for HDTV en masse, consigning perfectly good analog TVs to the U.S. waste stream. Eighty to 200 million televisions could be discarded over the next thirty months, says John Shegerian, CEO of Electronic Recyclers International, a leading electronics waste recycler. Worse, he says, there's no federal plan to recycle those sets, even though "almost everything in those TVs could be recycled."

"With all the new technology that keeps making our existing devices obsolete, we are in the midst of an ongoing tsunami of electronic waste," says Shegerian. "With February 17, 2009, the federally mandated date for full conversion to HDTV looming, we can only expect the accumulation of unwanted old electronics to go through the roof."

E-waste is already the fastest growing solid waste stream on earth. The United Nations Environmental Program estimates up to 50 million tons of electronics, called e-waste (TVs, computers, etc.), get trashed annually. That's 4,000 tons per hour. The bad news: the U.S. properly recycles only 12 percent of its e-waste.

Dumped in a landfill, analog TVs will leach toxins: Picture tubes hold up to eight pounds of toxic lead, while television plastic casings contain cancer-causing flame retardants. Other TV toxins can include cadmium, mercury, chromium, beryllium and arsenic. If not recycled, toxic TVs can poison people, soils and groundwater.

That's why California banned electronics from landfills in 2006. Massachusetts, Minnesota, North Carolina and six more states followed, while 35 states are considering such laws. However, banning e-waste from U.S. landfills only moves the problem elsewhere.

Most U.S. e-waste gets shipped to India, Southeast Asia, China and Africa, reports Forbes.com. "Workers there, often children making pennies a day, troll mounds of garbage in search of computers and TV's. Lacking tools to tear open computer shells, they burn the plastic to get to the valuable stuff inside, breathing noxious fumes. They dip circuit boards in acid and melt lead in the same pans they use to cook their meager meals. They toss any remains back on the pile, where toxins seep into water supplies."

So concerned is the TV industry about the global e-trash tsunami they've launched a website: "mygreenelectronics.org." That'll fix the problem! In fact, the industry seems intent not on squarely facing the TV recycling crisis, but on passing the buck, forcing taxpayers and consumers to foot the lion's share of recycling costs.

To date, only one TV maker, Sony, boasts a free national electronics recycling program for all its products. Meanwhile the so-called Electronics Manufacturers Coalition for Responsible Recycling, led by Panasonic, Sharp, and Philips, has fought tough "producer responsibility" recycling laws passed in nine states including Texas.

If the industry is really serious about taking responsibility, it should lobby as tirelessly as it did for HDTV, backing stalled federal legislation mandating e-waste recycling. That's something Europe has already done, making electronics manufacturers financially responsible for the complete life cycle of their products, turning recycled e-waste into a valuable resource. Congress could also ratify the Basel Convention, a treaty banning hazardous waste dumping on developing countries.

Of course we all have an alternative to the expense and hassle of technology upgrades. Forgo the sharper picture and bigger sound of HDTV. Just stop watching television all together. Take a walk. Read a book. Play with the kids. Plant a tree.

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