

# Too much of a good thing hobbles Best Buy's e-waste recycling

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The story of what's happening to Best Buy's inclusive recycling program is one you'll want to watch.

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More than any other U.S. retailer, Best Buy has been instrumental in building national awareness of the need for electronics recycling through free, in-store collections. But cost considerations are forcing changes to the groundbreaking program, which has collected more than **1 billion pounds of electronic waste since 2009**.

The move underscores a sad reality for **the e-cycling movement**: While more people than ever recognize that used equipment shouldn't be dumped in landfills, there are still far too few legitimate places to dispose of it responsibly.

Best Buy's e-waste volume, for example, has been growing at a rate of 20 percent. Dell, **one of the most active manufacturers on this front**, has collected more than 1.42 billion pounds on its way to a goal of 2 billion by 2020.

For perspective, about **46.1 million tons of e-waste** was produced during 2014, although that United Nations figure also includes things such as vacuum cleaners and other home appliances. Two countries, the United States and China, accounted for one-third of that amount.

The most visible change for Best Buy is a new fee of \$25 for every television or computer monitor dropped off at one of its locations.

The justification is economic. It has become far more difficult to find an outlet for recycled glass, which is a big part of these products. The sources that do exist aren't willing to pay that much, which means that Best Buy has been handling items containing leaded glass at a loss.

Another factor is the size of these items: some weigh as much as 85 pounds, which makes them cumbersome and expensive to transport. By the way, there's a lot of this stuff sitting in living rooms: The Consumer Technology Association figures [at least 34 percent of U.S. households](#) still have an old TV with a cathode-ray tube.

"Our goal has always been to simply break even on our recycling program, and we're not there today," wrote Laura Bishop, the retailer's vice president of public affairs and sustainability, in a blog post [about the changes](#).

That modification means Best Buy no longer will be able to accept these items from consumers in two states, Pennsylvania and Illinois, although they will be able to drop off other items such as batteries, ink cartridges, computers and printers. That's [because those two states make it illegal](#) for retailers to charge consumers for recycling programs, according to Best Buy.

That means there are literally no other options in some Pennsylvania and Illinois communities. Unfortunately, that reality is becoming more common as more U.S. cities and counties cut their recycling budgets, according to Best Buy. That situation has made it far more difficult for Best Buy to maintain its program.

"While providing recycling solutions for our customers is a priority, Best Buy should not be the sole e-cycling provider in any given area, nor should we assume the entire cost," Bishop wrote.

## **Past voluntary and legislatively supported commitments made by manufacturers have eroded.**

Another change made by Best Buy — one that has received far less attention — was its decision to work with electronics recyclers that carry either the e-Stewards or R2

certification, which mandate certain responsible handling processes. Previously, the retailer required both. Again, this is a cost-cutting measure — for both Best Buy and its recycling partners. But it could result in more electronics gadgets being sent offshore to developing countries, where unauthorized processing facilities have been dumping waste with little regard to contaminating soil or aquifers.

"So, to save money, Best Buy may be working with vendors who are less diligent about where their stuff goes and how it's processed," noted Barbara Kyle, national coordinator with the Electronics Takeback Coalition, in a [blog about Best Buy's decision](#). "In other words, their costs could be easily externalized to poor communities in developing countries."

## What's next for the e-cycling movement?

The coalition is otherwise pretty sympathetic to Best Buy's dilemma. Kyle noted that in the 25 states with no official e-cycling laws on the books, "Best Buy has been pretty much the only recycling game in town." That's in large part because other retailers and manufacturers have failed to take responsibility for the problem, she wrote in a [blog about Best Buy's decision](#).

Neither Walmart or Amazon, two of the biggest consumer electronics retailers in the United States, run formal recycling programs. "These retail giants are part of the enormous marketing engine that drive consumers to buy, buy, buy," Kyle wrote. "And they should be doing much more to make sure all this stuff gets reused and recycled."

Another nonprofit, the Product Stewardship Institute, was more vocal in its support of Best Buy and criticism of manufacturers that don't account for end-of-life costs for older products, even if the new ones they're developer are lighter and easy to recycle responsibly. The retailer has "borne more than its fair share of recycling costs" in places such as Illinois, Wisconsin and Minnesota, according to a [blog post by CEO Scott Cassel](#).

"Past voluntary and legislatively supported commitments made by manufacturers have eroded," Cassel noted. "They resist attempts to incorporate recycling costs into product price, and instead want to pass these costs on to someone else."

One vendor to watch closely is [Dell](#), which remains committed to its broad [collaboration with Goodwill](#) (called Reconnect) to take back virtually any brand of computer equipment for free. It handles monitors, but not televisions. Dell has focused on closed-loop solutions, in particular those that have increased its [use of recycled plastics new products](#).

Indeed, rather than focusing on the cost of recycling, more manufacturers should focus on the potential value — which would change the dialogue. [Apple, Microsoft and Motorola are](#)

among the pioneers here. All treat e-waste as a potential revenue stream rather than a liability.

An analysis conducted last fall by Trucost on behalf of the Greener Electronics Council found that the computer and electronics industry could generate up to \$10 billion in cost savings and natural capital benefits by reusing certain components — especially precious metals such as gold — more efficiently.