

## Connecticut program increases recycling of electronics and other products

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Connecticut officials have been working for a decade to broaden the responsibility for recycling from municipalities and taxpayers to the companies that manufacture or sell certain commodities and the consumers who buy them.

The effort began in 2007 when the [General Assembly](#) created a program called Extended Producer Responsibility, or EPR, requiring the electronics industry to help shoulder the costs associated with recycling televisions, computers, printers and monitors. Since then, similar programs have been created for paint, mattresses and mercury thermostats.

By including the cost of recycling these products into the purchase price, manufacturers and retailers can conduct their own recycling programs or reimburse municipalities that undertake the collections. So far, the program seems to be working well.

A recent study conducted by the [Product Stewardship Institute](#), a national nonprofit, concluded that the four existing EPR programs diverted more than 26 million pounds of materials from landfills, saved municipalities \$2.6 million annually, created more than 100 recycling-related jobs and reduced greenhouse gas emissions by more than 13 million kilograms of the carbon equivalent.

“It’s empirical evidence of the value we believed EPR programs would bring to Connecticut,” said [Tom Metzner](#), an environmental analyst for the state [Department of Energy and Environmental Protection](#). “This is the way to go. This is the way of the future.”

He added that EPR is a key part of the state’s goal to divert 60 percent of waste from disposal by 2024. [Jennifer Heaton-Jones](#), executive director of the Brookfield-based [Housatonic Resources Recovery Authority](#), said recycling has increased noticeably in the Danbury area as a result of EPR. The paint recycling program has proven especially popular and has saved municipalities about \$40,000 annually.

“Collecting paint, which used to be the biggest cost for our household hazardous waste collections, now costs our municipalities nothing,” she said.

She added 95 percent of Connecticut residents now live within a 15-minute drive of a paint collection site. Before the paint program began in 2013, Metzner said, there were few sites for collection of latex and oil paint and what was collected was expensive to transport. People were told instead to let unused paint dry out and throw it away. But after the law required addition of a recycling fee to the cost of paint, manufacturers created an infrastructure for recycling, he said.

By 2015, 82 percent of latex paint collected was being recycled or reused in some fashion.

“There was a huge pent-up need for this, and when it came on board, people were happy,” Metzner said. Connecticut was one of the first states to pass a law requiring manufacturers of computers, monitors and televisions to pay for the products’ transportation and recycling. The law was passed in 2007 and went into effect in 2011.

Since then, recycling of electronics has steadily increased, from 3.7 million pounds in 2009 to 18.6 million pounds in 2015.

Metzner said growing awareness of the program and in the number of drop-off sites helped; 273 sites were available by 2014, with 155 of the state’s towns having at least one.

“Convenience and accessibility is key,” he said.

The newest program involves recycling of mattresses.

In 2014, only 8.7 percent of discarded mattresses were recycled. After the program started in 2015, that percentage increased to 63.5 percent, representing 130,000 mattresses.

Heaton-Jones said the program not only saved owners the \$10 to \$30 cost of disposing of mattresses in landfills, but also reduced the number dumped alongside state roads.

**Eric Brown**, senior counsel for the Connecticut Business and Industry Association, said the mattress program has created challenges for businesses, including circumventing a program Sleepy’s already had in place.

The EPR programs are not uniformly successful. The thermostat program has underperformed compared to other states, especially in New England. One reason: Vermont and Maine offer \$5 incentives for returned thermostats, while Connecticut doesn’t.

Annual thermostat collections ranged from 1,550 to 2,120 between 2008 and 2013. Once the law was enacted, in 2013, the collections increased to 2,860 in 2014 and 3,860 in 2015.

Connecticut stopped selling mercury thermostats in 2004, but since the thermostats have a 30-year lifespan, the fee was assessed against producers of other thermostats sold in the state.

EPR also promotes voluntary recycling of products such as rechargeable batteries and plastic bags like those used for groceries.

The next step is to add other products to the mandatory program, Metzner said. A bill is under consideration this session to add tires to the mix.

But Brown cautioned against the idea that EPR is a “silver bullet” to reduce the wastestream. He said many business organizations oppose a bill that would allow DEEP to add new products to the program with little input from the General Assembly.

He said the state needs to take better account of what industries are already doing to reduce their waste, whether certain materials can be usefully re-purposed and the level of public demand for certain products. “The margins are so tight, nobody has the flexibility in wasting something that can be reused, so there’s already marketplace incentives,” Brown said. “There’s already a lot of innovation on how to pull from the waste stream that is overlooked.”

Information on recycling electronics is available at [bit.ly/1WhOOwb](https://bit.ly/1WhOOwb) . For mattresses, see [byebyemattress.com](http://byebyemattress.com) . For paint, go to [www.paintcare.org/](http://www.paintcare.org/) . For thermostats, go to [www.thermostat-recycle.org/statelaws/connecticut](http://www.thermostat-recycle.org/statelaws/connecticut) .

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