



Does not compute

David Menzies - Monday, 22 August 2005

Now that politicians have convinced us all to practise the “Three Rs” of reduce/reuse/recycle when it comes to disposing of items from aluminum pop cans and used motor oil to yesterday’s newsprint, there’s another big waste stream being targeted by provincial environment ministries: electronic waste. Canadian shoppers fill their carts with billions of dollars worth of high-tech gadgets every year--computers, DVD players, cell phones, camcorders, Palm Pilots, MP3 players, et cetera. By 2010, it’s estimated that about 184,000 tonnes of so-called “e-waste” will be thrown out every year in Canada. But governments aren’t always keen to let all those gizmos end up in landfills, since many items contain cadmium, lead and mercury and pose contamination threats.

Alberta was the first province in the country to tackle the problem head-on, last October, with its electronics stewardship program. Today, Albertans are required to fork over a so-called “environmental fee” at the retail level--ranging from \$5 for laptops to \$45 for big-screen TVs--to prepay for the costs of one day disposing of their high-tech device. But while the goal of diverting old TVs, PCs, and other such junk from landfill may be a good idea, critics note that the made-in-Alberta program is a boondoggle comparable to the much-maligned national firearms registry. Like the gun registry, they say, the Electronics Recycling Alberta program is costly, mismanaged by bureaucrats, and in the final analysis, not very effective.

According to Kevin O’Neil, director of operations for the Alberta Recycling Management Authority, the fact that Albertans can now take their unwanted electronics to one of dozens of e-recycling drop-off points, rather than just tossing them, puts Alberta in a “leadership role” when it comes to e-trash. O’Neil notes that a recent study indicates that this year, some 190,000 TVs are otherwise destined to go to Alberta landfills.

So, where are customers paying for all those computers to go, if not to landfills? O’Neil says it ends up with “downstream contractors”--companies that specialize in salvaging electronic parts. But he refuses to get specific about which companies and what they’re doing. Nor is there any way for the average Albertan to verify the claim. An audit of the program was conducted recently by engineering firm Stantec Inc., but ARMA won’t make the results available to the public. “It is confidential information between the company [Stantec] and us,” says O’Neil.

That's strange. ARMA is entirely publicly funded. And is expected to rake in between \$8 and \$10 million in revenue from environmental fees this year. Shouldn't it be required to disclose how that money has been used to deal with the hundreds of tonnes of e-trash it collects?

With the power, effectively, to tax all electronics purchases in the province, and a lack of transparency, it's no wonder Mel Fruitman, vice-president of the Ottawa-based Consumers' Association of Canada, labels ARMA's program "obscene and counter-productive." The advanced disposal fee, he says, is unfair to consumers. "A properly designed [recycling] system should [focus] on those who are responsible for producing and selling the product." In Maine, for instance, which is about to roll out its own e-trash program, manufacturers will be billed based on the quantity of their branded products that turn up in state landfills.

Thomas Lindhqvist, an associate professor at Sweden's International Institute for Industrial Environmental Economics at Lund University, says the Alberta program isn't very environmentally friendly either. He has studied the scheme and notes that there's no incentive for brand-owners to make products greener, given that recycling costs are passed on to consumers anyway.

The program's deficiencies might have to do with the fact that it was put together so hastily. Guy Crittenden, editor of industry trade magazine *Solid Waste and Recycling*, says Alberta's program was championed by the province's environment ministry, which was "hoping to score an environmental win." Crittenden says the scheme was "rushed through in months." As for consultations with the manufacturers themselves, well, there doesn't seem to have been much. "We're not clear if the due diligence was done from either an economic or environmental point of view," says Jay Illingworth, vice-president of Electronics Product Stewardship Canada, an industry group.

Even so, ARMA's O'Neil defends the beleaguered program. "We are doing this for our children and our children's children," he says. Then again, the next generations might be inclined to be more thankful if the things we were doing actually made some sense.