

Programs enlist manufacturers to help handle hazardous garbage

Product stewardship addresses more than hazardous waste

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March 23, 2017 8:35 a.m.

<http://www.oregonmetro.gov/news/programs-enlist-manufacturers-help-handle-hazardous-garbage>

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Certain [household products](#) that feel safe enough when you're using them can seem less safe when you start thinking about throwing them away.

That old TV served you well for years, but in the landfill it can leak heavy metals, polluting water and harming wildlife. The leftover paint in your basement can't go in the garbage either, let alone down a drain. Antifreeze, rug cleaner, fluorescent light bulbs – these are things we know almost instinctively should be handled separately. Because they're hazardous.

Most of the time, what happens to these products is left entirely up to those who purchase them. In the greater Portland region, for example, you take hazardous waste to a [Metro facility](#) or a [neighborhood cleanup event](#).

But in some cases, the makers of products that are dangerous to garbage workers and toxic in the landfill share the responsibility of managing their disposal – and in doing so, share the cost of handling the waste and minimize its impact on the environment.

It's a concept known as product stewardship. And the idea is that whoever designs, manufactures, sells or uses a product bears some responsibility for reducing the harm that product could cause throughout its life, from production to disposal.

Innovative state laws pave the way for producer responsibility

Right now, Metro is working in the Oregon State Legislature to pass a [bill](#) requiring companies selling hazardous household products to fund and manage programs to collect and safely recycle or dispose of those products. This would include products such as oven cleaners, pool chemicals and solvents – anything toxic, corrosive, flammable or chemically reactive.

Jim Quinn, manager of Metro's hazardous waste program, says the greater Portland region arguably does the best job in the state of safely managing household hazardous waste, collecting 5.5 million pounds of it each year for safe disposal. But, he says, even so, about 4 million pounds per year of hazardous waste still ends up in the trash.

“That just proves that we could be doing a much better job, says Quinn. “It’s the main argument for doing this bill.”

The bill in the Legislature right now is modeled after Oregon’s pioneering paint stewardship law, passed in 2009. It required manufacturers who sell paint in Oregon to develop and implement a program to take back and safely handle leftover paint.

The result was [PaintCare](#), a nonprofit organization that set up a statewide collection network for leftover paint, and systems for handling it. This broad infrastructure is intended to make it convenient for people to do the right thing.

Jeremy Jones, West Coast program manager of PaintCare, recently told Oregon legislators that about 10 percent of all paint purchased never gets used. In 2015, about 7 percent of the 8.6 million gallons of paint sold in Oregon was collected for reuse, recycling or safe disposal. Jones attributes the high collection rate to convenience. When the PaintCare program began, Oregonians had 15 locations (plus some collection events) for dropping off leftover paint at no charge. Now there are 167. It’s easier, according to Jones, for people to act on their good intentions.

PaintCare now operates in eight other states and Washington D.C., funded through fees on each container of paint sold in those states. Here in Oregon, it led to a partnership with [MetroPaint](#), which has been recycling old paint into new paint since the early 1990s. And the growth in drop-off locations and collection rates means more feedstock for recycled paint.

“It’s a great example of industry taking responsibility for their product at the end of its life,” says Jim Quinn.

Oregon E-cycles also works with manufacturers

Oregon was the first state to pass a paint stewardship law, but two years earlier, the state passed a bill requiring electronics manufacturers to participate in a recycling plan, either organized by the manufacturer or set up by a statewide contractor that takes back and recycles their products.

People can bring electronics to a participating Oregon E-cycles site and recycle them at no charge, keeping computers, monitors, TVs, printers, keyboards and mice – and the heavy metals they contain – out of landfills and incinerators, while also ensuring the reuse of valuable resources, such as precious metals. According to the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality, an estimated 200 million pounds of electronic devices were collected for reuse and recycling between 2009 and 2016.

But some manufacturers now complying with the Oregon E-cycles law say the recycling costs them too much. Walter Alcorn of the Consumer Technology Association recently told Oregon

legislators considering the current stewardship bill “We’re spending \$7 or \$8 million a year to support recycling.”

Metro senior planner Scott Klag says that in the past, the cost of disposing of waste like paint and electronics was spread across the garbage and recycling bills paid by both residents and businesses. But with the adoption of product stewardship laws, Klag says, only the consumers of those products pay those costs.

While some manufacturers have mixed feelings, others, as in within the paint and mattress industries, are working with local governments to pass producer responsibility laws in more states. In doing so, they reflect public opinion expressed in a telephone survey Metro conducted in greater Portland in 2014. The majority of survey respondents (86.9%) strongly agreed or agreed that “the businesses who manufacture hazardous products, rather than the government, should have the responsibility to pay for convenient facilities or locations for consumers to safely dispose of those products.”

Bill in Legislature looks to Canada

Oregon would be the first state in the U.S. to pass a comprehensive household hazardous waste stewardship bill. But Scott Cassel, founder and CEO of the Product Stewardship Institute says Canada is already doing it successfully. “It’s not like we’d have to reinvent the wheel.”

In British Columbia, he says, a household waste stewardship program has been running since 1997. There and in two other Canadian provinces, manufacturers pay a third-party nonprofit organization to manage the recycling and disposal of paint, as well as flammable items, pesticides, and other dangerous household products.

The programs, funded by manufacturers, give consumers more options for safely disposing of hazardous waste and keep more of these products out of the garbage.

In British Columbia, the stewardship organization must meet targets for collection and recycling as well as conduct regular landfill audits. “Residents of B.C. do support the programs,” says Teresa Conner, senior policy advisor at the British Columbia Ministry of Environment. “We don’t see a lot of stuff ending up in landfills.”

Product stewardship addresses more than hazardous waste

Across the U.S., innovative product stewardship laws are already in place for a variety of products. California and Vermont have each passed eight state-wide laws for products such as batteries, carpet, and mercury thermostats.

In 2015 and 2016, California, Connecticut and Rhode Island enacted mattress stewardship laws. Up to 90 percent of mattress components, such as foam, fiber and metals, are recyclable.

Since manufacturers have more control on what they put out into the world than retailers who sell the products or the consumers who use them, stewardship proponents argue, manufacturer participation in managing where those products ultimately end up can help reduce their health and environmental impacts.

Some producer responsibility programs are widespread. More than 30 European countries, as well as Canada and some countries in Asia and Africa, have laws that require producers to cover the costs of recycling the packaging they use for their products.

So far, only Canada has laws in place that make the producers of corrosive, flammable or poisonous household products responsible for recycling or safely disposing of them.

“Household hazardous waste stewardship is the future,” Scott Cassel says, “and the future exists already in Canada.”