

OPEN FORUM

Who pays the real cost of toxic waste?

Jared Blumenfeld

This week, a statewide ban goes into effect that makes it illegal to put household batteries, fluorescent lights, electronic devices and mercury thermostats in the trash. The reason for this ban is simple: All these products contain toxic materials.

The fact is, most of us don't realize that many of the products we throw away are hazardous to our health and the environment. And even when we do have an inkling that something really shouldn't go in the trash, we wonder: Where do I put dead batteries? What about a broken VCR, or that annoying musical greeting card? According to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, nearly 75 percent of old electronics are in storage, in part because people don't know what to do with them.

Because these items can no longer go in the black garbage cart, cities must expand services and create new collection programs. San Francisco and other local governments around the state are facing the multimillion-dollar question: Who will pay the costs of handling discarded consumer products that are toxic, reactive, combustible or corrosive?

Right now, the answer is you and me. Taxpayers and garbage ratepayers are footing the bill. San Francisco residents and businesses pay millions of dollars each year for toxics collection, and this cost will only go up as more and more materials that need special handling enter the waste stream.

By shouldering the costs of disposal, San Franciscans are essentially subsidizing the manufacture of waste. Manufacturers know that no matter what they produce and no matter how toxic the ingredients, local governments will foot the bill for recycling or disposal. A manufacturer's responsibility for its product now ends at the point of sale. Herein lies the problem -- and the solution.

When brand owners are responsible for ensuring their products are recycled responsibly, and when health and environmental costs are included in the product price, there is a strong incentive to design goods to be more durable, easy to recycle and less toxic. This is the thinking behind a better approach to managing (and preventing) waste called "extended producer responsibility."

Producer responsibility laws have been enacted in about 30 countries in regions as diverse as Europe, Asia and Latin America. In 2004, California promoted both producer and retailer responsibility with the Cell Phone Recycling Act. Effective July 1, the law will require that cell phone retailers have in place a system for the acceptance and collection of used cell phones for reuse, recycling or proper disposal.

What's hazardous about cell phones? The batteries contain the toxic metal cadmium, while the phone circuitry contains a number of toxic heavy metals including lead, copper, antimony, chromium and nickel. Once the cell phone is in a landfill or wherever else it ends up, the metals can contaminate groundwater. In California alone, more than 16 million cell phones end up in landfill each year, according to legislative research. This new law has given a jump-start to recycling and refurbishing businesses, often run by manufacturers and retailers. The recycling and disposal costs have shifted from local governments and citizens to the manufacturers, retailers and, ultimately, the actual cell-phone users themselves.

San Francisco is poised to be a leader in promoting producer responsibility. Our residents and businesses actively participate in recycling programs that help us achieve one of the highest recycling rates in the country. We can lead by example with innovative resource-management programs, but our efforts should have an even greater reach.

We need to work together across California to urge statewide producer-responsibility policies. In line with our efforts to reduce, reuse and recycle, producer responsibility reduces waste as well as costs to ratepayers and taxpayers, while protecting public health and the environment. We simply need to wrap our heads around the not-so-radical notion that the people who create and use toxic products should pay for their disposal.

Jared Blumenfeld is director of San Francisco's Environment Department. Visit www.sfenvironment.org to find out how to dispose of toxic household materials.