

Fact Sheet  
June 2003

# Managing Universal Waste in California



## RULES FOR MANAGING SOME COMMON WASTES

*DTSC is one of six Boards and Departments within the California Environmental Protection Agency. DTSC's mission is to restore, protect and enhance the environment, to ensure public health, environmental quality and economic vitality, by regulating hazardous waste, conducting and overseeing cleanups, and developing and promoting pollution prevention.*

State of California



California  
Environmental  
Protection Agency



### Introduction

New laws adopted since 2000 created California's "Universal Waste Rule" to simplify how we manage many common hazardous wastes. The Department of Toxic Substances Control (DTSC) has developed this fact sheet to provide information about these laws.

### What are universal wastes?

Universal wastes are hazardous wastes that are more common and pose a lower risk to people and the environment than other hazardous wastes. Federal and State regulations identify universal wastes and provide simple rules for handling, recycling, and disposing of them. The regulations, called the "Universal Waste Rule," are in the California Code of Regulations, title 22, division 4.5, chapter 23. All citations in this fact sheet refer to the California Code of Regulations, title 22, division 4.5, unless otherwise indicated.

All universal wastes are hazardous wastes and, without the new rules, they would have to be managed under the same stringent standards as other hazardous wastes. Also, universal wastes are generated by a wide variety of people rather than by the industrial businesses that primarily generate other hazardous wastes.

Not all waste products of a particular type are hazardous waste and universal waste. For example, waste thermometers that contain mercury are universal wastes but waste thermometers that contain alcohol are neither hazardous waste nor universal waste.

### Hazardous Wastes

- Most are generated by industrial businesses
- Subject to detailed management standards

### Universal Wastes

- Lower risk than other hazardous wastes
- Generated by a wide variety of people
- Reduced management requirements

### Note:

Wastes that do not contain hazardous substances are not universal wastes even if they are similar to universal wastes.

*The energy challenge facing California is real. Every Californian needs to take immediate action to reduce energy consumption. For a list of simple ways you can reduce demand and cut your energy costs, see our web site at [www.dtsc.ca.gov](http://www.dtsc.ca.gov).*

## What items are designated as universal wastes?

The following items are universal wastes when they are no longer useful or are discarded:

1. **Mercury thermostats.** These thermostats contain small glass capsules of mercury, a shiny liquid metal, to make electrical contact. Modern electronic thermostats do not contain mercury.
2. **Batteries.** Universal waste batteries include rechargeable nickel-cadmium batteries, silver button batteries, mercury batteries, small sealed lead acid batteries (burglar alarm and emergency light batteries), most alkaline batteries, carbon-zinc batteries, and any other batteries that exhibit a characteristic of a hazardous waste (§§66261.20 through 66261.24).

*NOTE: Spent automotive-type lead acid storage batteries are not universal waste. They are hazardous wastes that require management as specified in chapter 16, article 7.*

3. **Lamps.** Universal waste lamps include fluorescent tubes, high intensity discharge lamps, sodium vapor lamps, and any other lamps that exhibit a characteristic of a hazardous waste. Some fluorescent tubes will not be considered hazardous waste, or universal waste, until 2004. For more information regarding which tubes are currently considered hazardous and non-hazardous, call the information numbers listed at the end of this document.

### The Four Hazardous Waste Characteristics

*An unwanted material may be considered hazardous if it has any of the following properties:*

Toxicity (poisonous)  
Reactivity (can explode)  
Ignitability (can catch fire)  
Corrosivity (acidic or alkaline)

4. **Non-empty aerosol cans.** The Legislature added non-empty aerosol cans to the list of universal wastes in 2001. This fact sheet does not address management of non-empty aerosol cans. For information, see Health and Safety Code section 25201.16.
5. **Mercury switches.** Two different types of mercury switches are universal wastes:
  - Motor vehicle light switches that contain mercury. Health and Safety Code section 25214.6 designates motor vehicle light switches (automatic hood and trunk light switches) containing mercury as universal wastes once they are removed from vehicles. As of January 2005, vehicles that contain the switches will also be considered hazardous waste until the mercury light switches are removed.
  - Non-automotive mercury switches and products that contain them, when they are recycled as scrap metal. These switches include thermostats and tip switches in portable heaters, washing machine out-of-balance switches, silent wall switches, and other mercury-containing switches and products containing them. As of February 9, 2006, all discarded products that contain mercury switches will be universal wastes.
6. **Mercury thermometers,** including fever thermometers.
7. **Pressure or vacuum gauges** that contain mercury such as U tube manometers, barometers, and sphygmomanometers (blood pressure meters.)
8. **Dilators and weighted tubing.** These medical devices contain mercury.
9. **Rubber flooring** that contains mercury. Older gymnasium floors that were poured in place to form indoor tracks and gymnastic areas frequently contain mercury.
10. **Novelties** that contain mercury or mercury batteries such as some singing greeting cards, flashing athletic shoes, jewelry, and other devices. As of January 1, 2004, all novelties with added mercury are considered hazardous and universal wastes.

11. **Mercury gas flow regulators.** These older gas flow regulators are managed exclusively by natural gas utilities.
12. **Counterweights and dampers,** including devices that use pouches of high density mercury to dampen shaking on hunting bows and snow skis or to absorb recoil on shotguns.
13. **Dental amalgam** tooth filling materials including waste amalgam, bits and pieces from chairside traps, and spent wastewater filters.
14. **Consumer electronic devices.** Electronics that exhibit hazardous characteristics such as some cell phones, game consoles, and computers (ch. 11, art. 3).
15. **Cathode ray tubes.** Waste cathode ray tubes (CRTs), such as television picture tubes and non-flat panel computer monitors, are universal wastes with special management standards. This fact sheet does not address managing waste CRTs; see the DTSC fact sheet entitled [Managing Waste Cathode Ray Tubes](http://www.dtsc.ca.gov/LawsRegulationsPolicies/CRTs/index.html) at: [www.dtsc.ca.gov/LawsRegulationsPolicies/CRTs/index.html](http://www.dtsc.ca.gov/LawsRegulationsPolicies/CRTs/index.html).
16. **Gauges.** Vacuum and pressure gauges that contain mercury, including blood pressure gauges, barometers, and manometers

### Do these regulations apply to me?

If you generate universal wastes, you must comply with these regulations. However, two exemptions temporarily allow people to dispose of some universal wastes in the regular trash. *These exemptions only apply to waste lamps, thermostats, batteries, and consumer electronic devices.*

**Households:** Universal waste batteries, thermostats, lamps, and consumer electronic devices generated by people maintaining their private household are exempt. They may be disposed of in the trash unless forbidden by the local solid waste authorities. This exemption will end on February 8, 2006.

**Conditionally exempt small quantity universal waste generators:** The smallest commercial hazardous waste generators may temporarily dispose of their universal waste batteries, thermostats, lamps, and consumer electronic devices in the trash, unless forbidden by the local solid waste authorities. These exemptions

will end on February 8, 2006. To qualify for this exemption, you must meet the following conditions:

From February 9, 2002 until February 8, 2004:

- Generate less than 100 kilograms (220 pounds) of total federally regulated hazardous waste, including all universal wastes (except CRTs) in any calendar month; and
- Generate less than 1 kilogram (2.2 pounds) of any waste identified as an acutely hazardous waste in chapter 11; and
- Remain in compliance with Code of Federal Regulations, title 40, section 261.5.

From February 9, 2004 until February 8, 2006:

- You must meet the above requirements, and
- During this period, you may dispose of no more than 30 universal waste lamps and no more than 20 pounds of universal waste batteries in the regular trash in any calendar month. Mercury thermostats must be recycled or disposed of as hazardous waste.

## Temporary and Conditional Universal Waste Exemptions

*are in place for batteries, thermostats, lamps, and consumer electronic devices **only**.*

*These exemptions do not apply to CRTs (TV and computer glass), non-empty aerosol cans, or most universal wastes containing mercury.*

Household universal waste is exempt until February 2006.



Small business universal waste is exempt until 2006, if certain conditions are met.

