

What's the matter with Texas?

TEXAS LAGS BEHIND OTHER STATES IN ELECTRONICS RECYCLING AND EDUCATION EFFORTS ARE LACKING. WHY DOES THE LONE STAR STATE'S PROGRAM CONTINUE TO STRUGGLE AND WHAT CAN BE DONE TO TURN IT AROUND?

By Tyson Sowell and Robin Schneider



In February, the Texas Campaign for the Environment Fund (TCEF), a Texas nonprofit environmental organization based in Austin, released two reports assessing the efficacy of the second year of the Texas Computer-Equipment Recycling Program.

The program, enacted by HB 2714, went into effect on September 1, 2008 and requires computer manufacturers doing business in Texas to provide individuals and home businesses with recycling options for used desktops, laptops, and monitors. Under the state e-scrap law, recycling options must be free, “reasonably convenient” and “designed to meet the collection needs of consumers in this state.”

Unlevel playing field

In the report *Making TakeBack Work Better In Texas: Second-Year Results of the Computer Take-Back Law and How Texas Can Do Better*, TCEF found that the e-scrap collection amounts reported by the computer manufacturers in 2010 were 60 percent higher than in 2009. However, four of the 78 companies selling computers in Texas collected 92 percent of the total. According to TCEF, this demonstrates that the law has not created a level playing field.

Of the 24,370,894 pounds collected, 92 percent of electronic waste collected in 2010 was collected by only four manufacturers: Dell, Samsung, Altex Electronics (a small San Antonio-based company) and Sony (Figure 1). The remaining 8 percent was collected by 38 manufacturers while an additional 36 manufacturers collected zero pounds.

Additionally, the leading seller of computers in the U.S., Hewlett-Packard Co., only collected 0.19 percent of manufacturer collections statewide.

In Texas, many manufacturer recovery plans consist largely of mail-back programs and/or single or multiple drop-off collection sites. Manufacturers that followed the mail-back model, and only provided a mail-back option, almost invariably recycled less than manufacturers that implemented permanent drop-off locations. Michigan, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Texas, Virginia, and West Virginia all have similar mail-back model laws and ranked in the bottom six of the 12 states surveyed. These six states collected less than one pound of e-waste per person. By contrast, Oregon and Washington collected 6.35 and 5.86 pounds per person, respectively, in the second year of their program operations.

An uninformed populous

According to TCEF, educating municipal officials regarding producer takeback programs and policies is critical for the development of a long-term, sustainable e-cycling infrastructure in Texas because residents often contact their local governments first with recycling and disposal inquiries.

TCEF found that local governments remain uninformed with regard to e-waste recycling and the Texas Computer-Equipment Recycling Program. Most municipal websites – 75 percent – do not provide a link to the state e-waste website. The report shows that although the total number of municipalities providing a link (47) has increased over last year (33), the increase could have been far more dramatic had 19 municipalities not removed the link from their websites. Municipal websites that do provide a link represent roughly half of the surveyed population area.

In addition, only 26 percent of the calls to city officials referenced a free producer take-back option. Similar to cities that removed the link to the state e-waste website, calls to officials