

Product Stewardship – Awareness vs. Disposal

The San Gabriel Valley Council of Governments (SGVCOG) received a grant from CalRecycle to establish convenient retail and business take-back locations for household batteries and mercury-containing lamps. As part of this effort, a telephone survey and focus group research was conducted with consumers and retailers in the San Gabriel Valley to collect baseline information on their knowledge and attitudes product stewardship.

Background

Product stewardship means being responsible for all phases of a product's lifecycle – from design to end-of-life (EOL) – and places the primary responsibility for product EOL management with the producer. This is a significant paradigm shift from current practices, which place the primary burden (and cost) on local governments and taxpayers.

Awareness

One of the primary issues associated with managing disposal of these products is that consumers are often unaware that they contain hazardous materials, and even if they are, they do not know how or where to properly dispose of them or it is too inconvenient. SGVCOG's telephone survey of San Gabriel Valley residents found that 59% are aware of the toxicity in batteries while 42% are aware of the hazards of lamps.

Furthermore, 56% of those surveyed still disposed of batteries in the trash and 45% dispose of toxic lamps in the trash (see Figure 1). This finding means that many consumers do not know about the toxicity of the batteries and lamps, and even when consumers do know batteries and lamps are toxic these products will still end up in the trash.

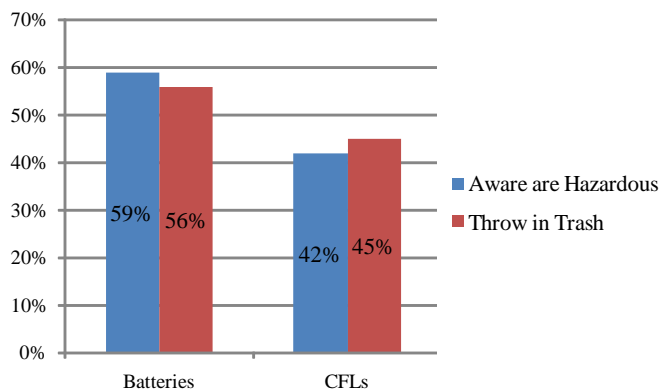


Figure 1. Awareness vs. Disposal

Need for Convenient Alternatives

Any effort to change consumers' behavior is further challenged by the need develop an alternative that is as convenient as their current habits, which are typically to throw these items in the trash. Consumers participating in focus group research indicated that people dispose of hazardous items illegally for a variety of reasons, including not knowing items were hazardous, being unaware of where to properly dispose of lamps and batteries, and the convenience of just throwing in the trash. Many of the consumers said they would dispose of batteries and lamps at hazardous waste collection points if they knew these materials were toxic, where to take them, and if it was convenient.

When asked if they would take lamps and batteries to a business that offers a take-back program, 85% of those surveyed stated that they are likely to use such a program. The majority said a grocery store would be the most convenient location. In addition, 69% of the respondents said they are more likely to recycle if they are offered an incentive, such as a coupon toward the purchase of an item in the store.

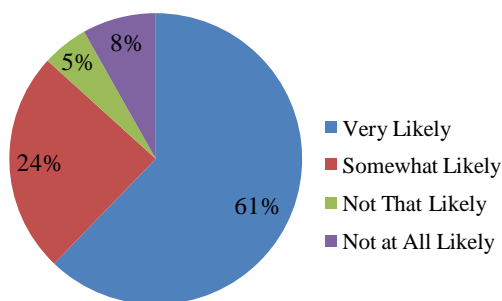


Figure 2. Would Use Take Back Program

"I never thought twice about it because I didn't know. If you tell them, people would recycle. I try to recycle everything, but I didn't know about this." —Consumer Focus Group Participant

"Make it so that discarding them would be part of people's regular process, for example, the place to get rid of it could be at the supermarkets you go to get them to begin with."

—Consumer Focus Group Participant