

Product Stewardship: Responsibly Managing E-waste, Mercury Lights and Medicines

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Abstract: Collecting and recycling, or disposing of, consumer products containing toxic substances present challenges to hazardous waste and solid waste programs. Public health professionals are also concerned about these products as sources of potentially harmful chemical exposures and environmental contamination that contribute to chronic diseases and disabilities. A key barrier to substantially reducing exposures and pollution is adequate and sustainable funding to provide convenient and effective recycling and disposal programs for residents. Product stewardship or “extended producer responsibility” approaches shift the responsibility for managing waste products from local governments and their ratepayers to the product producers. Product stewardship programs can reduce public costs, improve accessibility to services, and attain higher environmental and health benefits. Linking end-of-life management back to the product’s designer also creates drivers for design changes towards less toxic and more recyclable products. This session will explain product stewardship principles and provide examples of successes and challenges of existing programs. Initiatives in Washington will be put into context of activities in other states, as well as prospects for national actions. Washington’s E-Cycle program is a manufacturer funded and provided recycling program for TVs, monitors, and computers initiated in January 2009. Results of the first nine months of E-Cycle, which is collecting millions of pounds of electronics, will be assessed. Efforts to increase recycling rates from households for mercury-containing fluorescent lights through product stewardship will be described. An update will be provided on state and federal efforts to establish medicine return programs to safely collect and dispose of unwanted prescription and over-the-counter medicines to reduce accidental poisonings and drug abuse.