

Focus on Product Stewardship Shifts Waste Disposal Responsibility to Manufacturers

By [Cory Vanderpool](#) | February 2nd, 2010



Most manufacturers of products that contain hazardous substances, like toxic mercury, cadmium, nickel, arsenic and lead, don't think much about the end of their products life cycle. The onus to properly dispose of many banned substances is predominantly on the consumer. The problem with this scenario is that people still dispose of [batteries](#), fluorescent lights, needles, cell phones, radios, computers and even televisions, through regular waste streams. In California, for example, citizens who throw batteries or CFL lights in the trash are creating a major headache for the waste management authority. Local governments frustrated with the burden, and the financial repercussions that result from it, are finally taking a stand and pushing back.

During the past year lawmakers in Maine, California, Minnesota and Oregon have proposed ways to start shifting the burden of waste disposal from the public to the private sector. The idea centers around "product stewardship" which means that manufacturers themselves would be required to pay for collecting, recycling and disposing of designated products after their consumers are through with them.

Supporters – local governments and environmental groups – say product stewardship would encourage manufacturers to design less-toxic products and reduce packaging waste. Prices would likely go up for consumers, but ratepayers would not be subsidizing waste disposal for things they didn't purchase. Business groups, on the other hand, say the practice would hurt consumers and kill jobs.

The concept and importance of [product stewardship](#) is well established in Europe, Canada, Japan and South Korea and is becoming less foreign here in the States. In recent years, 19 states, including Maine and Minnesota (but not California) have passed “take-back” laws requiring producers (manufacturers), brand owners and importers, to collect and recycle household electronics. Maine leads the nation with [five product-by-product stewardship laws](#). In 2004, Maine became the first state to require producers to take back discarded televisions, computer monitors, desktop printers and video game consoles.

The Maine legislature is currently considering a [cradle to grave product stewardship mandate](#), which has the potential to significantly impact every manufacturer whose products are sold in that state, including wholesalers and retailers who sell the products of non-compliant manufacturers.

According to a study done by the [University of Southern Maine](#) and published in the December issue of *Waste Management*, Maine nearly quadrupled its collection and recycling of [electronic waste](#) from 2006 (when the law went into effect), through 2008. Maine also requires producers to take back mercury-containing thermostats and auto-switches and a current bill would require producer take-backs of [drugs](#).

California, which is still suffering from [extensive financial problems](#), is trying to catch up to Maine and is hoping that new take-back laws will reduce the costs associated with managing hazardous materials. The county of Santa Clara, for instance, spends \$4 million a year to collect hazardous waste from a mere five percent of households. [Rob D’Arcy](#) manages the hazmat program for the county and believes “It’s almost disgraceful, the responsibility that’s placed on local government to pay for these services, when they should be functions of the market.”

There is no question that Americans are throwing away more trash than ever before. It’s up from 2.7 pounds per person per day in 1960 to 4.5 pounds in 2008, according to the [U.S. Environmental Protection Agency](#). About 75 percent of this trash is products and packaging, materials that may contain plastics, acids, heavy metals and petroleum by-products harmful to public health. Recycling, meanwhile, has leveled out nationally to about 33 percent of the municipal waste stream.

[California currently leads the nation](#) with a recycling rate of 58 percent.