

Electric and Electronic Waste: the Norwegian example and EU Directives

In 1999, Norway became the first country in the world to introduce a national requirement for the collection and processing of Electric and Electronic (EE) waste. Since then, Norway has set the standard for EE waste management and recently declared that in 2004 over 90% of EE waste (102,000 tonnes) was collected and processed, surpassing the five-year target of 80% returns.

EE waste consists of all electric and electronic waste – e.g. computers, televisions, refrigerators, washing machines, etc. EE products often contain environmentally hazardous materials such as PCBs, CFCs or heavy metals and the Norwegian EE waste policy has been designed to improve the treatment and disposal of such materials.

Manufacturers and importers were obliged to establish a nation-wide system for the collection and processing of EE waste, which included informing the public on EE waste and ensuring correct recovery of EE waste after consumption. Distributors and retailers are obliged to ensure EE waste of the same product type they sell is taken back from consumers and businesses for no charge (irrespective of where a product was purchased), then sorted, stored and forwarded to a processing centre. Local authorities must ensure there are appropriate and free delivery points for household EE waste and take back waste from commercial sources. Like distributors, local authorities are obliged to inform the public of EE waste treatment provisions and to ensure the sorting, storage and forwarding of waste to processors. Financial penalties are imposed by the Norwegian Pollution Control Authority for non-compliance.

Three co-operative return companies – Renas, Elektronikkretur and Hvitvarertur (the latter two, since 1 April 2005, merged under the name Elretur AS) – have been responsible for 94% of the collections, with Renas achieving close to 100% in its return rate. According to Renas, almost 90% of these materials can be recycled and used as the raw materials for new products, demonstrating the significance of this policy for sustainable development practitioners.

Interestingly, the Norwegian experience shows that the highest levels of returns are for domestic appliances, data and lighting equipment and professional machines. Toys and telecommunications equipment have low rates of return.

The EU has adopted a joint body of regulations concerning the collection of EE waste. Directive 2002/96/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council 27 January 2003 on waste electrical and electronic equipment as amended by Directive 2003/108/EC, and Directive 2002/95/EC of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 January 2003 on the restriction of the use of certain hazardous substances in electrical and electronic equipment, aim to ensure the recycling and reuse of electric and electronic products. These directives should have been enforced into national legislation by 13 August 2004.

The following categories are covered by the Directive: large and small household appliances; IT and telecommunications equipment; consumer equipment; lighting equipment; electrical and electronic tools (with the exception of large-scale stationary industrial tools); toys, leisure and sports equipment; medical devices (with the exception of implanted and infected products); monitoring and control instruments; automatic dispensers. Moreover, states are to encourage and producers obliged to identify better processes in design and production to facilitate dismantling, recovery and reuse after disposal. Producers must also cover costs, including collection.

The Directive on Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment requires EU Member States to collect at least 4kg of EE waste from households per inhabitant each year and to establish collection systems for electronic equipment by August 2005 (August 2007 for the new Member States). Once such systems are in place, consumers will be able to return used products to shops and collection points free of charge for safe disposal. The Directive on the Restriction of the Use of Hazardous Substances bans certain hazardous substances such as lead and cadmium from electronic equipment from 1 July 2006.

On 11 July 2005, the European Commission formally asked eight member states – Estonia, Finland, France, Greece, Italy, Malta, Poland and the UK – to transpose the EU Directives concerning EE Waste into national law. France, Italy and the UK had failed to transpose the Directives whereas the other five states failed to transpose the entirety or fully implement the Directives. The final written warnings sent to the states are the last step before referral to the European Court of Justice.

For more information on Norway: <http://www.sft.no> (Norsk and English)
<http://www.gronnhverdag.no> (Norsk)
<http://www.renas.no> (Norsk and English)

European Union Waste Policy:
http://europa.eu.int/comm/environment/waste/waste_topics.htm

The Directives are available at:
<http://europa.eu.int/scadplus/leg/en/lvb/l21210.htm>