

Local, free electronics recycling could become more difficult March 1 unless last-minute changes are made in current legislative session

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Although the electronics recycling area at Dahl Disposal in Waldport is small and unassuming, company officials are fighting to keep the free program available to its customers in the area.

By JORDAN ESSOE/YachatsNews.com

Residents of south Lincoln County will soon have fewer places to recycle their electronic waste for free – but an uproar over the change may only be leading to more confusion.

Coastal residents are used to being able to drop off their old computers or televisions at Dahl Disposal's recycling and transfer stations in Waldport and Toledo to have them recycled at no charge. This is going to change March 1.

Oregon E-Cycles is the state program that allows for the complimentary recycling of laptops, desktops, printers, monitors, keyboards and televisions. After Oregon's Bottle Bill it is the oldest recycling program in the state, beginning in 2010 when a law banned disposing toxic electronic waste in landfills.

It has been both popular and successful. Oregon recycles more volume of electronic waste per capita than a similar program in Washington. Usually the volume of electronic recyclables, which totaled over 14 million pounds in 2021, has been a point of pride. This year it is a problem.

Eight collection sites across Oregon are being dropped from the state contractor network run by the nonprofit National Center for Electronics Recycling. Two of these sites are Dahl Disposal's recycling and transfer stations in Waldport and Toledo. People can still use free recycling sites in Newport, Florence, Lincoln City, and elsewhere, but it will mean driving a little farther.

Debating solutions

The change may not be permanent, but while solutions are debated and pursued, industry managers have three primary concerns.

One worry is that people who feel inconvenienced will dispose of toxic electronic waste recklessly — and illegally — if it isn't as easy and quick enough for them to dispose of it safely.



“People will try to mix it into their garbage,” said Joseph Cook, general manager for Dahl Disposal.

Jason Linnell, NCER’s executive director, is not as worried.

“Collection sites have changed over the years and we haven’t seen dramatic disruptions because of that,” Linnell told YachatsNews. “Things change and people are able to adapt as long as there are still sites available – and there are.”

A second concern is that forcing nearby locations like Thompson’s Sanitary Service in Newport to absorb the extra supply from Dahl will create problems there, including the inability to safely store the materials away from weather while it awaits pickup. There are strict regulations with penalties if electronic waste is not handled appropriately.

The third concern is about who will pay for the recycling of electronics should Dahl decide to continue to collect electronic waste outside of the Oregon E-Cycles program. One expectation is that Dahl will pass that cost onto its customers through a

general rate increase. Cook regrets this possibility since, he says, customers have already paid for the recycling fee when they purchased the electronics. Recycling costs are often built into the price the electronics manufacturers charge for their goods.

Local haulers frustrated

There is a lot of frustration from both Dahl and Thompson's, which expect residents will be angry and confused once they become aware of the change in service. Haulers have been working to drum up support in city councils and with county commissioners to put pressure on NCER and the Oregon Department of Environmental Equality, which oversees the recycling program.

Electronic recycling programs are funded by manufacturers and overseen by the DEQ, which sets a collection goal mid-year for the following calendar year. Unlike Washington state, Oregon has two options that manufacturers can choose from. One is the state contractor program run by NCER, which handles about 30 percent of Oregon's electronic recycling and requires manufacturers to pre-pay for the expected costs.

The alternative is a consortium called Electronic Manufacturers Recycling Management Co., which handles 70 percent of Oregon's electronic recycling.

The two Dahl sites have been working with NCER, and they are among the eight that NCER is dropping from its network beginning March 1. Other sites are in Hillsboro, northeast Portland, White City, Klamath Falls and Grants Pass.



Old computers are collected at the electronics recycling area of Dahl Disposal in Waldport. The primary reason NCER is making changes to its network is because – as counterintuitive as it may sound — they collected too many electronic recyclables last year. They collected 35 percent more than the goal set by DEQ the previous year and prepaid by the manufacturers. NCER has never had a collection overage of that size before.

NCER has also found itself in the position where even though it is only responsible for about 30 percent of the state's electronic waste collection, its network has often been enlisted to recycle as much as 50 percent of Oregon's annual electronic waste. This has occurred because they are required to recycle whatever amount is disposed at sites within its network — regardless of which manufacturer made the goods. This cannot only throw NCER's operation out of balance, but it may put some manufacturers in a position where they end up paying more than they are obligated to.

When NCER collects more than the manufactures have prepaid for, manufacturers are later given a bill for the outstanding amount. That's not a big deal when the percentage of overage is in the single digits. But 2020 saw a 20 percent overage. And

the 35 percent overage in 2021 represents 1.7 million pounds of unanticipated e-waste.

This makes NCER look noncompetitive to manufacturers who may be tempted to shift out of the state contractor program and join MRM's program instead. This would further shrink NCER's share of contracts while still roughly asking them to maintain the same annual load.

It could also mean financial trouble for the Oregon electronics recycling program.

"It's a real conundrum," said Cheryl Grabham, the E-Cycles program manager at DEQ.

Picking up some sites

MRM is picking up some collection sites NCER is dropping. They have put Southern Oregon Sanitation in Grants Pass under contract and are in discussions to pick up Rogue Disposal's White City transfer station, a location that has been very vocal in its frustration over having its NCER contract canceled.

The potential of Rogue Disposal's staying in the E-Cycles program gives some hope to other haulers in their position. Cook said Dahl has not approached MRM to service Waldport and Toledo. MRM said they are looking at all options.

As to why the Waldport and Toledo locations were dropped while NCER kept Thompson's, Cook suspects the decision was due to Dahl's locations being in more remote areas where it's more expensive to drive back and forth.

That may be a factor, but primarily the calculus for NCER has to do with the mandates of the state's program. E-Cycles has a convenience clause that requires one collection site per county, and also one location for every town that has a population of 10,000 or more.

Newport, where Thompson's is located, has 10,500 people. The population of Toledo is approximately 3,500, and Waldport is roughly 2,300.

Even if MRM passes on most of NCER's dropped sites, there is reason for hope. If the collection goal for 2023, which will be set in May or June of this year, is appropriately

larger, it is possible sites like Waldport and Toledo will be added back into an E-Cycles network beginning next January.

Haulers have demanded that the collection goal for 2022 be raised. But DEQ's collection goal for 2022 is even smaller than the dramatically underestimated 2021 collection goal.

That's because the pounds of electronic waste decreases every year because newer electronics weigh less and continue to get lighter.

Legislative changes?

DEQ pursued the question of adjusting the collection goal with lawyers at the Oregon Department of Justice and reached the conclusion it wasn't a legally flexible option. They determined the only way to alter the pounds goal in the middle of the year was through legislation.



Marsh

Rep. Pam Marsh, D-Ashland has introduced a bill in the 2022 Legislature to achieve just that. Her bill would increase the collection goal for the remainder of 2022 and would also require program operators to include willing local collection sites in their network. This would force NCER to keep all the sites they are dropping if those sites wanted to keep their recycling contracts.

“We are hoping [the bill] gets a hearing in Rules Committee next week,” Marsh told YachatsNews.

But things move very quickly in a short session, and Marsh's bill may not find immediate success.

“It was quickly drafted to address the urgent e-waste issues that have emerged in the last couple of weeks,” Marsh told YachatsNews. “To be clear, getting a bill passed at this point in the session is a little bit of a long shot, but we thought it was worth trying. If the e-waste recycling system is undermined, we will likely see old laptops or monitors dumped where they shouldn’t be, and that’s a huge concern.”

DEQ managers feels that even if Marsh’s bill fails, the conversation will nevertheless continue.

“We expect to have more robust conversations during a full legislative session,” Grabham told YachatsNews. “We’ve learned a lot over the past decade. I think the story here is actually that this has initiated a conversation about how to update the program. If we were going to create an electronics recycling program today, how would we do it? It would probably look a little different.”

“I do think this will all resolve,” said Paul Seitz, manager of the Lincoln County Solid Waste District.

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