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For more information contact:
Rep. Mark Miller, 608-266-5342
David Wood, 608-255-0837
608-347-7043 (cell)

Business, Environmentalists, and Local Government Back Legislation to Promote Responsible Electronics Recycling in Wisconsin

Rep. Mark Miller's bill proposes producer driven solution to toxic electronic waste

Madison, WI – In response to citizen concern over the increasing quantity of hazardous electronic waste in Wisconsin, Assembly Representative Mark Miller introduced legislation calling for take-back and recycling programs to be financed by computer and electronics producers.

"Electronic products contain highly toxic materials that endanger public and environmental health," says Rep. Miller. "This proposal is similar to waste management programs that are working in Europe."

Discarded electronic waste, also known as e-waste, is among the fastest growing waste streams in the industrialized world. Rising sales and rapid product turnover have led to an estimated 300 million - 600 million obsolete computers in the United States alone. This unwanted electronic waste is highly toxic and poses a major health threat to the public; the average computer contains 32 known toxic chemicals, including quantities of lead, mercury, arsenic, cadmium, polyvinyl chloride and mixed plastics. Currently, Wisconsin has no laws regulating the disposal of electronic equipment, resulting in tens of thousands of computers ending up in the state's landfills each year. An estimated 70% of the heavy metals found in landfills come from this discarded electronic waste.

"Electronic waste is not only a threat to human health and the environment, it represents an enormous potential unfunded mandate on local governments," says David Wood, Executive Director of GrassRoots Recycling Network and co-coordinator of the national Computer TakeBack Campaign. "The producer responsibility approach can solve environmental problems without spending already scarce taxpayer dollars. It is consistent with recent efforts to create jobs while providing regulatory flexibility," continues Wood.

The new legislation seeks to solve Wisconsin's e-waste crisis by requiring electronics producers to finance the collection and recycling of equipment they sell in the state.

"The bill makes electronics producers responsible for the entire life-cycle of the products they sell," said Representative Miller. "This extended producer responsibility solution shifts the burden for collection and recycling from the taxpayers to the producers, providing a financial incentive for companies to design products that are durable, less toxic, and more easily recyclable."

Wisconsin joins the ranks of 10 other states, including Minnesota, California, Massachusetts, Maine and Washington, which have introduced similar legislation.

Producer take-back programs are already in place in many western European countries and Japan.

Already, the legislation has garnered support through-out the state. Student interns from the GrassRoots Recycling Network presented over 3,000 signed computer diskettes in favor of the bill.

“We used out-dated 5 ¼ inch floppy disks as petitions to demonstrate the prevalence of obsolete technologies for which no one was responsible, which create waste management burdens on taxpayers and local government,” says Clare Cragan, UW-Madison senior and GRRN computer campaign organizer. “Today’s college students are the first generation to grow up recycling and using PCs. Representative Miller’s legislation is vital to reducing the harms from otherwise helpful products.”

The legislation represents a break from traditional command and control environmental regulation, providing electronics producers flexibility to design take-back and recycling systems that best suit their particular business models. Recently, industry leaders like Hewlett-Packard and Dell have publicly acknowledged the business advantages of reducing the environmental impacts of their products and taking stewardship over products throughout their life-cycle.

Electronics recycling is a growing industry with strong potential for job creation and local economic development. Wisconsin is home to several leading electronics recyclers, including two that were among the first to be recognized for outstanding environmental performance – Madison’s Cascade Asset Management and Holmen’s Scientific Recycling.

“With an estimated 400 million electronic units being retired by the end of this decade, the computer and household electronics recycling infrastructure will need to grow by a factor of 4 or five to meet this increased demand,” says Neil Peters-Michaud, CEO of Cascade Asset Management, a Madison-based electronics recycling company. “Wisconsin can become a leader in this industry with a clear direction from the legislature on regulatory requirements and a strong support for responsible and environmentally sound processors in the state.”

Representative Miller’s bill is scheduled for hearing on Thursday February 12th before the Assembly Natural Resources Committee.

Fact sheets about electronic waste in Wisconsin can be accessed on-line at <http://www.grrn.org/e-scrap/>.