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Mexican Government Criticized For Lack Of Policies To Dispose Of Electronic Waste

by LADB Staff

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The lack of policies on disposing of used electronic equipment in Mexico is creating major problems in the country's landfills, which are quickly filling up with hazardous materials from discarded products. Approximately 150,000 tons to 180,000 tons of electronic equipment including cellular and land telephones, computers, televisions, batteries, audio and video units, and other similar items are discarded in Mexico a year, said a recent study by the Universidad Nacional Autonoma de Mexico (UNAM).

The UNAM study, led by researcher Heberto Ferreira Medina, said the federal government has failed to develop guidelines for consumers to dispose of their used electronic products. Without guidance from the federal government, state and municipal authorities have not issued their own guidelines. "We are far behind on promoting a disposal policy," said Ferreira, director of UNAM's Centro de Investigaciones en Ecosistemas (CIEco). The researcher said there are few, if any, collection points for used equipment in Mexico. There is an initiative in the Mexico City legislature (Asamblea Legislativa del Distrito Federal, ALDF) to convince the administration of Mayor Marcelo Ebrard to implement an electronics-recycling program.

The effort is led by the environmental-protection committee (Comision de Preservacion del Medio Ambiente), which warned that a lack of planning could further increase discarded electronics in landfills. "This is a huge risk for the health and welfare of our citizens," said ALDF member Leonardo Alvarez Romo, who chairs the environmental committee. Alvarez said the average life of electronics is about five years. "At present, we have 5.4 million cellular telephones, 25 million televisions, and 12 million personal computers throughout the country," said the legislator. "In five years, at least half will become obsolete and will be considered waste." Toxic substances contaminate landfills A related problem, said Ferreira, is the lack of policies similar to those in Europe where parts of discarded equipment, including hard drives and memory chips, are collected and reused. "In our country, all these items are treated as garbage," added Ferreira. "Technology becomes obsolete very quickly," said Juan Carlos Guel Lopez, director of computer security at UNAM's Direccion General de Servicios de Computo Academico (DGSCA), who agreed that Mexico lacks adequate norms to deal with technological waste.

The biggest danger of the lack of recycling is that metals and other toxic wastes frequently leak into the landfills, creating a very toxic environment. Ferreira said one viable option would be for Mexico to implement a program where some of the discarded equipment would be refurbished and reconditioned and then donated to schools or other institutions that could benefit from these items. Another researcher, Marisol Angeles Hernandez of UNAM's Instituto de Investigaciones Jurídicas (IIJ), said Mexico has instruments at its disposal to implement better policies. For example, the country subscribes to various international conventions regarding hazardous-waste disposal.

In addition, the Ley General del Equilibrio Ecologico y la Proteccion al Ambiente deals with managing polychlorinated biphenyl, one component of electronic residues. There are currently some efforts in the schools in Mexico City and surrounding communities in the metropolitan area to promote recycling cell-phone batteries through a program known as *Rockea y Cuida el Planeta* (Rock and Take Care of the Planet). Under the program, sponsored by cell-phone company Nokia, students are taught about the hazards posed by electronic waste. One discarded battery can contaminate 600,000 liters of water, equivalent to the amount that 11 persons consume during their lifetime, said a spokesperson for the campaign. The campaign says that 20 million cell-phone batteries have been discarded improperly in Mexico in recent years because of a lack of proper disposal policies.

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