Changing Electronic Waste Handling in California

By Brian Hamlin, Principal, BitBuckets

Have you tried to recycle those old computers piling up in the garage, lately? Maybe there is a monitor or two - or even that 42" color behemoth that served so well for so many years. The way that used electronics, notably CRTs, are being handled is changing. Here is a snapshot of the story.

California banned CRT disposal from landfills, and hence the ability to drop those monitors and TVs in the garbage, on August 3, 2001, following Massachusetts lead approximately a year and a half earlier. After more than 2 years of legislative head-butting, then Gov. Davis signed SB20, the California Electronic Waste Recycling Act, into law on Sep. 24, 2003. SB20 is being shaped in regulation by the joint efforts of the Department of Toxic Substances Control (DTSC) and California Integrated Waste Management Board (CIWMB) as we speak. Barring any surprise actions from our new Republican leadership, portions of the law will go into effect throughout 2004 and beyond.

So what does this mean to the recycling community? SB20 brings money into a recycling system for CRTs, perhaps a lot of money, but it’s not scalable or even desirable as a long-term solution to electronics waste handling.

SB20 relies on an upfront fee paid by consumers at product purchase time, somewhat like the Bottle Bill, to create a CIWMB-administered fund to pay for end-of-life handling and destruction. Often those materials are recycled, but not always. And more importantly, since no costs are tied to the way the product is built or disassembled, there is no hard motivation for a manufacturer to change the design of these complex products to make for better end-of-life processing.

These are not simple glass bottles or aluminum cans we are talking about here. Since CRTs and other consumer electronics are dense, multi-part goods, the way that they are designed makes a huge difference in handling at the end of life. “Design for Environment” is a phrase used in the manufacturing industry to describe a way to design products that will get the most out of the end of life product, and ultimately have the

least impact on clean air and water. SB20 does nothing to reward state-of-the-art Design for Environment in electronic products.

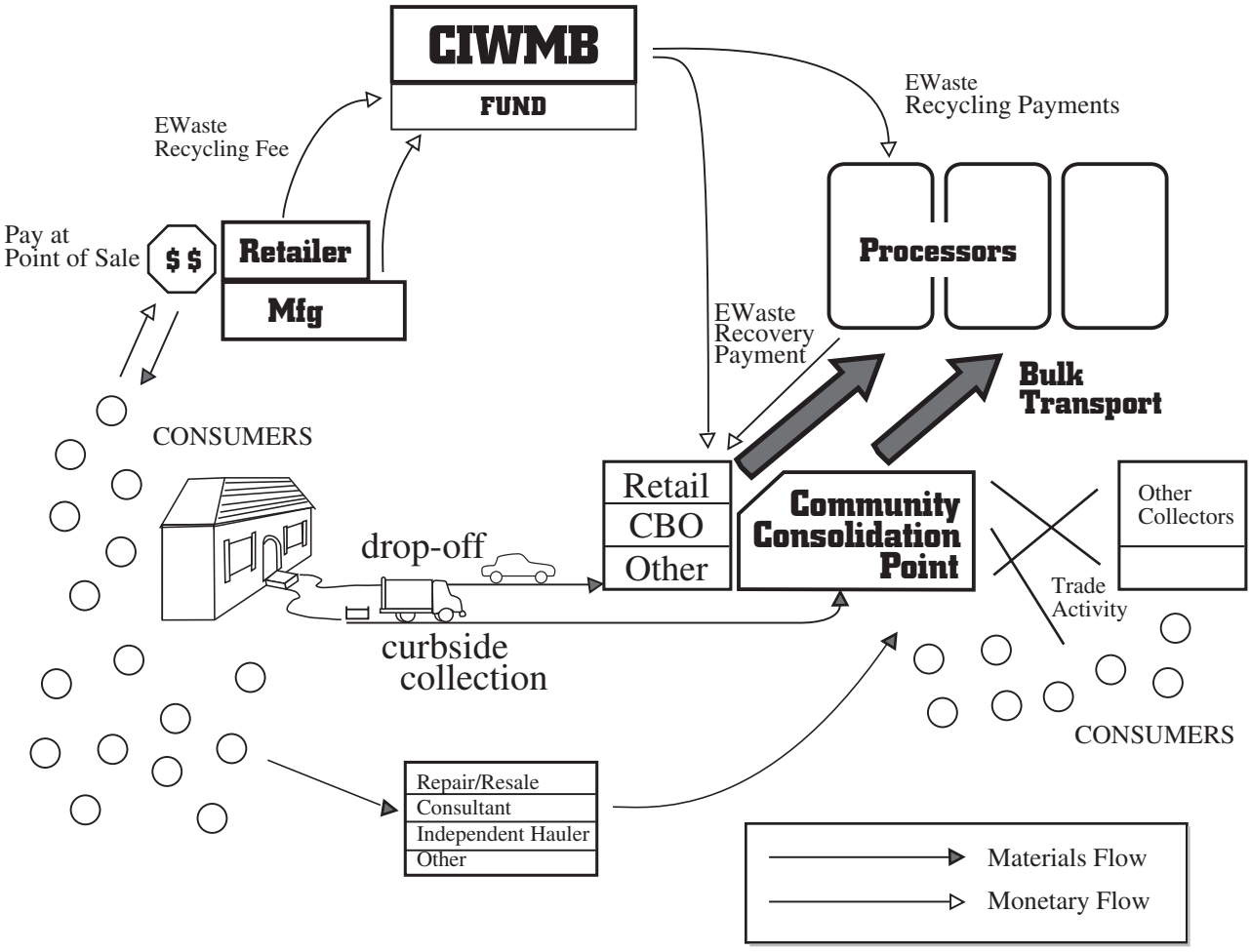
Depending on the final determination of the scope of products covered by the upfront fee, the size of the CA fund will range from at least $50 million to $150 million per year or more

Where will the processing of used CRTs be done? By now, almost everyone knows that there have been serious abuses of discarded electronics in the name of recycling, primarily in China. SB20 does not deal with the export issue well. Efforts are underway in Sacramento to tighten up scrutiny and enforcement of used CRT material export regulation, but right now it looks like a lot of "business as usual" ahead for overseas processors.

On the ground in California, recyclers are able to handle CRTs as universal waste, and will be paid something for their efforts starting this Fall, 2004. But the fact is that eventually all electronics - more and more every day - have to be recycled. The sooner a reliable industrial infrastructure builds out to handle the volume, and the products themselves evolve to facilitate the process, the better.

SB20 is a stopgap measure that will bring dollars to local collections programs, but it won't work as the scope of products expands, and as the debate returns to the national level for a policy solution to this increasingly pressing problem. The European Union is still miles ahead on program direction in Electronic Waste recycling. Nationally, the U.S. would be wise to look to the E.U. for the standards that are being set there in years to come.

California Electronic Waste Recycling Act 2003 – SB20



BitBuckets
PO Box 20740
Oakland, CA 94620

contact:
Brian Hamlin
iee@screenlight.com