

Business is booming for Anchorage e-waste recycler

ELECTRONICS: Company offers environmentally safe alternative to landfills.

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In a year when the economy struggled to recover, business boomed for Total Reclaim, a computer and electronics recycling firm now carrying its mantra on the merits of recycling all over the state of Alaska.

In 2009, Total Reclaim's lighting business quadrupled, and business overall grew about 30 percent, said Larry Zirkle, the energetic general manager of the firm's Alaska office.

Overall that amounts to about 53,000 pounds of electronics a week, of which everything but the chemically treated wood on television consoles is recyclable, he said.

"I think it's our outreach program," said Zirkle. "There are still no laws or regulations on throwing electronics away. I think it is because people are realizing the long-term effect of throwing (electronics) into landfills or on the side of the road."

Electronics contain a host of contaminants, such as lead, cadmium, beryllium and brominated flame retardants. When electronics are tossed into the landfill, the odds for contamination increase. If a liner at the landfill fails, toxic chemicals contained in the puddle of goo at the bottom of the liner could seep into the groundwater, said Riley Kosinski, outreach coordinator for Total Reclaim.

There are no studies on the long-term effectiveness of landfill liners, he said.

Total Reclaim, which Zirkle started in his garage in 2005, operates in a 4,000-square-foot warehouse in South Anchorage. Zirkle and his staff of eight have a mission to increase the number of businesses and individuals who recycle electronics.

"People are understanding. They walk into our shop and see piles of electronics, and we say 'that's only two days' work,' " said Zirkle. "About 10 times a day, we get phone calls asking if we take electronics. We want people to be aware so they can make intelligent decisions (about disposing electronics)."

Seattle-based Total Reclaim, a leading recycler of computers and electronics in the Pacific Northwest, offers a variety of innovative environmental services for electronics management and other hard-to-handle materials, including fluorescent lamps, refrigerant gases and household appliances.

To date the firm has processed in Seattle more than 150 million pounds of material from Washington state, Alaska and Oregon, working with customers to keep hazardous waste out of landfills.

For a fee, the company accepts various electronics and office machines, such as computers, monitors, printers, laptops, servers, routers, hubs, televisions, VCRs, DVD players, stereos and audio components, batteries and cell phones.

Most of this e-waste is processed and separated into various raw materials such as plastic, glass, steel, copper and aluminum, commodities that are then used as feedstock in the manufacture of new products.

Still all Total Reclaim's efforts to date are a drop in the bucket when compared to the total amount of waste that continues to get dumped into Alaska's landfills.

To date the collective electronics recycling effort has had minimal effect on the Anchorage landfill, said Mark Madden, director of solid waste services for the municipality of Anchorage.

Madden said the landfill takes in an average of 1,200 to 1,400 tons of waste a day, or a total of 300,000 to 350,000 tons annually, although there has been some decline since 2008, likely due to economic conditions.

The Anchorage Recycling Center does not accept electronics, but does recycle about 25,000 tons of other wastes annually, including aluminum and tin cans, newspaper, magazines and miscellaneous paper, cardboard and plastic bottles, said general manager Randy Virgin.

"It is daunting when you think about how much is going to the landfill," said Virgin, formerly of the Alaska Center for the Environment. "There are definitely things going to the landfill that could be recycled."

A lot of companies also backhaul electronics and other materials for recycling in the Pacific Northwest, transporting these materials south in the containers that were used to ship new products north, he said.

Still, tons of trash going to landfills in Alaska could be recycled.

That's why Total Reclaim set a goal to spread the word to communities all over Alaska on benefits of and how to recycle electronics.

The firm has held recycling events in Haines, Skagway, Soldotna, Homer, Kenai, Fairbanks, McGrath and Takotna and is working on another in Ketchikan, charging its normal recycling fees, while speaking on the benefits of electronics recycling.

The Matanuska-Susitna Valley, the fastest growing area of Alaska, does not currently have a program for electronics recycling, but Zirkle said he hopes to find a place where his firm can hold an event there.

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