

Switching to the Recycling Channel

Area Girds for Digital TV Changeover

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A stack of old television sets towered above Tim Webster as he put his own dust-covered, 20-year-old set onto the heap. He had replaced it with a new flat-screen TV and decided it was time to part with his old living-room companion.

"We were just waiting to see if this one had any use and, it turns out, it really doesn't," said Webster, who lives in Arlington. "It was time to move on."

Recycling centers and landfills across the country are preparing for a surge of unwanted sets in coming months. Next February, most TV broadcasts will be available only in digital form. As a result, sets that rely on antennas to receive over-the-air analog signals will no longer work on their own. At the same time, prices of digital TV sets continue to drop, luring consumers to upgrade.

"I think a lot of people are going to use the digital switch as a reason to buy a new TV," said Barbara Kyle, national coordinator for the Electronics TakeBack Coalition, which runs a campaign urging electronics manufacturers to collect old TV sets from consumers and recycle them for free. "The question is what happens to all the TVs people are getting rid of."

Last year, about 68 million TVs were thrown out, given away or recycled, according to the [Consumer Electronics Association](#)'s estimates. That number could grow this year: About 14 million households rely on over-the-air broadcasts, according to the Nielsen Co.

Tossing the old TV isn't an analog user's only option. Consumers can purchase converter boxes, which generally cost \$40 to \$100, to translate the digital signal back to analog, allowing people to keep using their current sets. They can apply for government-sponsored coupons worth \$40 to help pay for the converters. Subscribers to cable or satellite services will not have to do anything to continue watching TV on older analog sets.

Webster said he considered getting a converter box for his old TV but instead decided to spring for a digital set because the prices have become more affordable.

He was one of hundreds of Arlington residents who dropped off a total of 16,500 pounds of discarded TVs for recycling last Saturday at [Thomas Jefferson](#) Middle School. The county, which holds recycling events twice a year to collect electronics, household

hazardous waste and other hard-to-dispose-of items, took in a record number of TVs to be dismantled and recycled.

Electronics pose environmental threats because they contain hazardous chemicals, including mercury in batteries, cadmium in displays and toxins in circuit boards. Old-style TVs and computer monitors with cathode ray tubes, or CRTs, contain between four and eight pounds of lead. Environmentalists say such substances can be harmful when buried in landfills, potentially leaching toxins into groundwater supplies.

Many municipalities have set up recycling sites and hold events specifically geared toward electronics, including cellphones, computers, stereos and VCRs. Bulky TVs are not always accepted, partly because they are more expensive to transport and recycle. Consumers often have to pay a fee of \$10 to \$50 to recycle a TV, which creates an economic incentive for them to toss it into the landfill.

Some regions are anticipating a 30 percent increase in the number of TVs dropped off at recycling centers, according to Anne Reichman, program director for Earth 911, an Arizona-based company that helps coordinate recycling efforts across the country.

"We're seeing retailers provide sales that will entice consumers to upgrade to a better, more energy-efficient, cooler TV," she said. "But we're not confident the old TVs aren't going to landfills."

An estimated 32 million new televisions are expected to enter U.S. homes this year, while consumers expect to get rid of about 44 million, based on a survey of 1,000 people released this month by the Consumer Electronics Association. The survey indicated that most of those TVs will be sold, donated or recycled rather than thrown in the trash.

A previous survey by the association showed that about 14 percent of antenna-dependent households plan to buy a new digital TV before the transition occurs Feb. 17, 2009. About 60 percent of the 2,000 people surveyed said they intend to buy a converter box or subscribe to cable or satellite service to keep using their current TVs.

A dozen states, including Maryland and Virginia, have set up recycling programs for electronics, often requiring manufacturers to contribute to the recycling effort.

This year, Virginia passed a law requiring all manufacturers doing business in the state to help fund recycling programs for computers. But the law, which takes effect in July 2009, does not include TVs or other electronics.

Arlington, Fairfax, [Loudoun](#) and [Prince William counties](#), as well as Alexandria, host regular collection events. In some cases, collection fees are waived for county residents.

In Maryland, electronics manufacturers must pay a fee to do business in the state, which goes toward funding for county recycling programs. Starting this year, counties must accept TVs at their recycling centers to be eligible for state grants.

Seventeen of the state's 24 counties have set up permanent electronics recycling facilities. Hilary Miller, manager for the [Maryland Department of the Environment](#)'s recycling program, said Montgomery, [Anne Arundel](#), [Prince George's](#) and Baltimore counties usually collect the largest quantities of electronics.

"We don't envision a serious problem" with an influx of TVs coming to the county facilities, Miller said.

Some TV makers have started their own programs to take back their brand's TVs and pay to have them safely recycled. [Sony](#) said it has collected 6 million pounds of electronics since its program started in September. In response to various state laws, [Panasonic](#), partnering with [Toshiba](#) and Sharp, has started holding collection events and last year recycled 3.4 million pounds of TVs.

Mark Sharp, group manager of Panasonic's Corporate Environmental Department, said the company does not expect a big uptick in sales of new TVs. He added that recycling efforts have improved in recent years.

"We really don't forecast this deluge of products going into the waste stream" as a result of the digital transition, he said.

Brent Young, director of business development for E-Tech Recycling, which has drop-off centers for electronics in Chantilly and Portland, Ore., said he has seen the largest spike of TVs come in during public collections. He recently collected more than 2,500 pounds of TVs in three hours at an event near Portland.

"I think we'll see the largest increase before the transition happens in November and December, during the holiday shopping season," he said.

Tim Felegie of Arlington couldn't wait that long. When he pulled up to the recycling event last weekend, his 20-year-old Sharp TV, complete with push buttons and faux wood, was in the passenger seat to be dropped off.

Waiting in the car behind him was Mitt Mittendorff, who had bought a new flat-screen and had hauled his old 31-inch TV to be recycled.

"It's huge, and you have to hit it sharply in the corner sometimes to make it work."