

Low recycling rate highlights need for national battery stewardship scheme

New data on battery recycling supports the need for a national product stewardship scheme for batteries. A recent report for the Government-sponsored Battery Implementation Working Group (BIWG) has found that the recycling rate for handheld batteries was only 2.7% in 2012-13.

Based on a recent survey of manufacturers, retailers and recyclers, the report estimated that 14,703 tonnes of handheld batteries reached the end of their life during 2012-13, yet only 403 tonnes were recycled.

Around 385 million handheld batteries were disposed to landfill in 2012-13. This represents a loss of non-renewable resources including steel, lithium, zinc, manganese, cobalt, silver, plastics and rare earth elements.

Battery recycling allows the non-renewable resources in batteries to be recovered. It removes toxic and hazardous substances from landfill, particularly lead, cadmium and mercury that may contaminate groundwater and other recyclables if not managed correctly. Lithium metal batteries can cause explosions or fires in landfill.

A recent consumer survey conducted by market research company IPSOS in January 2014 found strong support for battery recycling. Three-quarters of respondents (77%) believe that it is important to recycle used batteries rather than dispose of them to landfill.

Voluntary battery recycling programs are continuing to grow with the support of leading brands, retailers, government authorities and recyclers. Companies such as Canon, Toshiba, Samsung, Century Yuasa Batteries, Exide Batteries, Supercharge Batteries and R&J Batteries are taking a leadership role through their membership of the Australian Battery Recycling Initiative (ABRI).

According to ABRI CEO Helen Lewis, "While some retailers and battery manufacturers are collecting batteries, much more needs to be done to meet community expectations and protect the environment."

"Collection and recycling services need to provide consumers with nationwide access to a free and convenient drop-off facility for their used batteries. This will require financial support from manufacturers, brands and importers to help cover collection and recycling costs" Dr Lewis said.

Australian governments established the Battery Implementation Working Group in August 2013 to help in the development of a voluntary stewardship scheme for handheld batteries.

"ABRI fully supports a voluntary collection scheme for handheld batteries, but acknowledges that the success of a voluntary scheme is unlikely without the full cooperation of all major manufacturers and importers" said Dr Lewis.

"Without the cooperation of these manufacturers in a voluntary scheme, regulation is likely to be required to create an effective solution for battery recycling in Australia. In the USA, battery manufacturers and importers are already working collaboratively with governments to introduce battery recycling regulations. Perhaps this is something that needs to be seriously considered for Australia".

In Australia, handheld batteries (up to 5kg) have again been listed by the Australian Government as a Priority Product for consideration under the Product Stewardship Act.

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