

Department of Toxic Substances Control

Universal Wastes to be Prohibited From Disposal

Questions and Answers on Requirements for Handling Universal Wastes*

1. What has changed? Until February 8, 2006 households and some small businesses are allowed to put waste batteries, electronic devices, and fluorescent light bulbs in the trash. Homeowners can also throw away mercury-containing thermostats until this date. After February 8, these items, called universal wastes, should not be placed in the trash.

2. What are universal wastes and why can't I put them in the trash? Universal wastes are hazardous wastes that are generated by several sectors of society, rather than a single industry or type of businesses. Hazardous wastes contain harmful chemicals, which, if put in the trash may harm people or the environment.

Universal wastes include:

Common Batteries – AA, AAA, C cells, D cells and button batteries (e.g. hearing aid batteries). These may contain a corrosive chemical that can cause burns as well as toxic heavy metals like cadmium. (Automotive type batteries are not universal waste. When they become waste, they are regulated under a different law.)

Fluorescent Tubes and Bulbs and Other Mercury-Containing Lamps
Fluorescent light tubes and bulbs, high intensity discharge (HID), metal halide, sodium, and neon bulbs. These lights contain mercury vapor that may be released to the environment when they are broken. Mercury is a toxic metal that can cause harm to people and animals including nerve damage and birth defects. If mercury is released into the environment it can contaminate the air we breathe and enter streams, rivers, and the ocean, where it can contaminate fish that people eat.

Thermostats – There is mercury inside the sealed glass "tilt switch" of the old style thermostats (not the newer electronic kind)

Electronic Devices such as: televisions and computer monitors, computers, printers, VCRs, cell phones, telephones, radios, and microwave ovens. These devices often contain heavy metals like lead, cadmium, copper, and chromium.

Electrical Switches and Relays typically contain about 3.5 grams of mercury each. Mercury switches can be found in some chest freezers, pre-1972 washing

machines, sump pumps, electric space heaters, clothes irons, silent light switches, automobile hood and trunk lights, and ABS brakes.

Pilot Light Sensors – Mercury-containing switches are found in some gas appliances such as stoves, ovens, clothes dryers, water heaters, furnaces and space heaters.

Mercury Gauges – Some gauges, such as barometers, manometers, blood pressure, and vacuum gauges contain mercury.

Mercury Added Novelties - Examples include greeting cards that play music when opened; athletic shoes (made before 1997) with flashing lights in soles; and mercury maze games.

Mercury Thermometers – Mercury thermometers typically contain about a half gram of mercury. Many health clinics, pharmacies and doctor's offices have thermometer exchange programs that will give you a new mercury-free fever thermometer in exchange for your old one.

Non-Empty Aerosol Cans that Contain Hazardous Materials – Many products in aerosol cans are toxic. And many aerosol cans contain flammables, like butane, as propellants for products like paint. If your aerosol can is labeled with words like TOXIC or FLAMMABLE don't put it in the trash unless it is completely empty.

3. What happens if I throw universal waste in the garbage? Like used motor oil and paint, universal waste is a kind of hazardous waste. It is illegal to dispose of hazardous waste in the garbage. In addition, by throwing universal waste in the garbage, you can cause additional hazards to your garbage handler. Eventually, chemicals in illegally disposed hazardous waste can be released into the environment and contaminate our air, water, and possibly the food we eat.

4. If I can't throw this stuff in the trash how do I get rid of it? Many local government agencies run programs that help households and small businesses recycle or properly dispose of their hazardous wastes. Additionally, some retailers will collect certain universal wastes, such as batteries. For information on local collection programs, contact your municipal waste service provider or go to <http://ccelearn.csus.edu/mercurylamp/content/resources5.htm> for the list of Household Hazardous Waste Program Web links. You can also check <http://www.earth911.org> for a universal waste collection program near you.

5. How do I know if a particular electronic device can't be thrown in the trash? DTSC has tested many electronic devices including: tube-type and flat panel televisions and computer monitors, laptop computers, computers (CPUs), printers, radios, microwave ovens, VCRs, cell phones, cordless phones, and telephone answering machines. The devices that DTSC tested contained concentrations of metals (lead and

copper) high enough to make them hazardous wastes when they are discarded. Unless you are sure they are not hazardous, you should presume these types of devices need to be recycled or disposed of as hazardous waste and that they may not be thrown in the trash. For additional assistance, you can call the Waste Evaluation help line at (916) 322-7676.

Other resources:

DTSC's web page on universal wastes

<http://www.dtsc.ca.gov/HazardousWaste/UniversalWaste/index.cfm>

California Integrated Waste Management Board's universal waste web page:

<http://www.ciwmb.ca.gov/WPIE/HazSub/UniWaste.htm>

California Recycling:

<http://www.recycle.ca.gov/>

* The answers to these FAQ are intended to give general guidance to households. For specific requirements please see Title 22 California Code of Regulations section 66273 et seq. or check out the publications page on DTSC's web site www.dtsc.ca.gov