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Not-For-Profit's Want To Be Involved in E-Waste Legislation Framework

8th July 2010

In 2010 more than 2.1 million computers will enter the market, while 3 million will reach their 'end-of-life' and need to be disposed off safely.

Not-For-Profit (NFP) organisations have been working quietly in the background turning the overwhelmingly urgent and ugly issue of e-waste into an opportunity for Australia. Yet, NFPs could face serious challenges to viability, even closure, if the Government does not secure the continuing role of NFPs in its work to manage Australia's e-waste.

E-waste recycling is about to undergo a transformation with the implementation of a national product stewardship scheme that will see producers of televisions and computers taking responsibility for recycling end-of-use equipment.

The Federal Government announced in November 2009 it would implement regulation that supports an industry led scheme for the national collection and recycling of TVs and PCs. While this is certainly good news, there was concern that NFP groups would not be considered as part of the scheme's framework, essentially leaving them out of the loop. Although up until now, NFPs have been integral in the collection, reuse and safe recycling of much of our e-waste.

Renewable Recyclers, a NFP 'social enterprise' of Psychiatric Rehabilitation Australia (PRA), felt an independent report would assist the NFP sector to collaborate with and inform industry and the Government of the role and value the NFP sector could provide in Australia's e-waste management.

NFPs have been integral in addressing the e-waste problem in Australia as they collect, disassemble and recycle what can be reprocessed, and refurbish equipment that is still useful. Thus saving our finite natural resources and providing low-cost technology to disadvantaged individuals and communities.

NFPs, like the Illawarra's Renewable Recyclers, not only help bridge the digital divide, they employ unskilled workers, the long-term unemployed, and people with disabilities or a mental health illness – providing green jobs and skills to people who have barriers to employment.

The NFP sector, including Renewable Recyclers, would like to see their involvement and role in e-waste management expand with the introduction of the national scheme.

This milestone report, produced by Hyder Consulting, confirms that under the scheme NFPs are at risk of becoming marginalised, meaning they will find it challenging to remain viable in competition with commercial entities that are larger in scale and in receipt of scheme subsidies.

One of the report's key findings is that under a stewardship scheme, recycling incentives might override refurbishment incentives, meaning thousands of working computers will be recycled instead of refurbished and sold to those who can't afford new technology. However, as refurbishment is considered a higher environmental benefit, it makes sense that NFPs should be given access to equipment collected under scheme for refurbishment. This would

allow the residual material sent to reprocessors to be counted towards the scheme's collection and recycling targets and mean that NFPs could continue their good work for the community.

Jane Castle from Total Environment Centre believes refurbishment should be the number one priority for Australia's computer recycling scheme. "Simply shredding computers in good condition should be the last resort, not the first," said Ms Castle.

"Used computers contain vast amounts of embodied energy and other resources from the manufacturing process. These should be conserved so that the environmental effectiveness of the scheme is maximised."

Alison Perizi, Manager of Renewable Recyclers, agrees that refurbishment should be considered a priority. "Refurbishment avoids landfill, conserves resources, creates employment and fulfils community demand for low cost computers. Reusing PCs ensures a digitally inclusive Australia," she said.

The opportunities for NFPs such as Renewable Recyclers, to provide positive environmental, social and economic benefits to the community under the scheme are immense.

Much of the work that is required for TV and PC recycling is relatively low skilled, and suited to many of the people NFP agencies assist in finding employment and training. For NFP employees, especially the long-term unemployed, it can be the much needed stepping stone to mainstream employment.

Ms Perizi is strongly in favour of the needs of NFPs being heard, "Through employment and training in e-waste management NFP's are able to provide a flexible and supportive work environment for those in our society who are so often simply left behind," she says. "These opportunities are absolutely vital in getting disadvantaged Australians into the workforce and enabling social inclusion."

"We are not simply providing a job or pay cheque but rather a sense of purpose, hope and wellbeing; personal benefits that go well beyond the monetary reward and which have a knock-on benefit to society."

NFPs have essentially pioneered in the issue of e-waste solutions, as well as community support. They welcome an opportunity to be included under the Government's new Stewardship Scheme so they can continue their good work for the community.

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- *Psychiatric Rehabilitation Australia – The role of not-for-profit organisations in managing e-waste. A report produced by Hyder Consulting Pty Ltd.*