

New EU Directive Raises E-Waste Recycling Targets

January/February 2012

On January 19, 2012, the European Parliament amended the Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment (WEEE) legislation by adopting a directive that sets aggressive new e-waste recycling targets. These targets dramatically raise the collection and recycling obligations of manufacturers, distributors and retailers.

Currently the European Union's (EU) target recycling rate is 4 kg per person per year. EU member states agreed to phase in the new targets with an initial annual recycling target in 2016 of 45 percent, by weight, of the average annual electronic goods sales over the prior three years. By 2019, the target will rise to 65 percent. Alternatively, member states may meet a parallel target, collecting 85 percent by weight of electronic waste generated domestically each year.

The new directive imposes an obligation on distributors and retailers to establish or expand existing collection programs, and producers of electronic goods are expected to finance such programs. These reverse-distribution programs must be free of charge to consumers and must accept material regardless of the original manufacturer or retailer. In addition, EU member states will have the option to establish residential collection programs or designated collection locations.

The timing of the rollout of the new recycling targets depends on the speed at which each member state adopts implementing statutes or regulations, but it must be in force by July 2013.

The amendments to WEEE also included a new requirement to collect 85 percent of all end-of-life solar panels and to recycle 80 percent. The new requirements mandate that solar panels must be collected separately from other products. The EU Council must still approve the new directive, but there is little chance it will face any challenges. EU member states will be required to comply with this new requirement 18 months after implementation.