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Battery Recycling Initiative May Be Recharged

Talks are likely among manufacturers, program participants, and policy-makers on ways to strengthen collection measurements and performance.



The extent to which rechargeable batteries are entering the solid waste stream and potentially contaminating the environment is unknown. Photo: RBRC

The Rechargeable Battery Recycling Corp. (R.B.R.C.) will not adopt the number-one recommendation made in the independent study it commissioned. The Product Stewardship Institute (PSI) advises the industry-run take-back organization to measure its collection rate for

primary and secondary batteries against the amount sold annually. Performance is tracked this way in all EU member nations. Environment Canada also supports it.

“We don’t object to collection targets. But we don’t want them to be the only measure,” says R.B.R.C. President Carl Smith.

Smith joined R.B.R.C. just one year ago. He has experience in strategic marketing, brand positioning, and distribution development. He also was a budget analyst for the U.S. Congress. Most recently he was CEO of Greenguard Environmental Institute, a developer of standards for indoor air products and buildings.

The comprehensive PSI study, “**Battery Performance Metrics: Recommendations for Best Practice**,” marks a new direction for the program towards more transparency. Smith says it is correct to anticipate that R.B.R.C. will act

on the last recommendation made in it. Manufacturers are likely to establish an advisory committee that includes outside parties.

“This study is meant to motivate all key stakeholders to reach a consensus on performance measures with an emphasis on a collection rate target supported by convenience measures, per capita collection rates, and wider sustainability metrics,” says Scott Cassel, PSI’s executive director.

Created by manufacturers in 1994, R.B.R.C. stopped disclosing recycling rates as soon as the collection of spent cells turned out to be far lower than expected (see **Extending Producer Responsibility to Rechargeable Batteries Is Failing**, 1 August 2003). In reports to 11 states and New York City that have collection programs, the industry non-profit states the pounds collected.

Two states, Minnesota and New Jersey, require manufacturers to keep track of the numbers of batteries collected and recycled. Minnesota asks for an estimated quantity of batteries sold and collected each year. New Jersey mandates that battery manufacturers send a biannual report to the state detailing recycling rates, but does not recommend a calculation method. Performance metrics R.B.R.C. currently uses appear not to satisfy the two states’ regulatory requirements.

In April of 2009, the organization announced that it had collected over 50 million pounds of rechargeable batteries in its 15 years of operation — slightly more than 3 million pounds a year, mostly nickel cadmium but also including lithium ion, nickel-metal hydride, and the small sealed lead acid types found in uninterruptable power supplies; emergency lighting, fire and security alarms, and medical devices. The R.B.R.C.-operated **Call2Recycle** campaign also collects cell phones.

Whatever the recycling rate, it is very low. Even based on its own measures, R.B.R.C. collected 7 million pounds of rechargeable batteries in 2008. Years ago it had predicted 14 million pounds by 2003.

R.B.R.C. has maintained that collection rates are misleading. “They are not a revealing number,” Smith says. “Typically they are based on amounts sold into the market in a particular amount of time.”

Consumers tend to hoard spent cells, and assumptions have to be made about the lifespan of various types of batteries.

“Environment Canada compiled its own ‘collection rate’ calculation. The model is not public information; it’s considered proprietary to the consultant that did it for the government,” Smith says. “Each country in Europe has used their own formula. The EU battery directive attempts to attain uniform reporting by 2012.

“So, give us a clear and transparent calculation, that is generally used by others, and we’re very happy to report it.”

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