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US FEDERAL GOVERNMENT

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On April 30, 2002, President George W. Bush appointed John Howard as the Federal Environmental Executive. He and his office are working to promote sustainable environmental stewardship throughout the federal government. Previously, Mr. Howard was the Senior Associate Director for the White House Council on Environmental Quality; the Environment and Natural Resources Policy Director for then-Governor Bush; and an environmental attorney in Washington, D.C., and Austin, Texas. He graduated from Baylor University and received his law degree from the University of Texas.

interview

THE OFFICE OF THE FEDERAL ENVIRONMENTAL EXECUTIVE WAS CREATED BY PRESIDENTIAL EXECUTIVE ORDER IN 1993. TODAY, THEIR MISSION IS TO PROMOTE SUSTAINABLE ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP THROUGHOUT THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT. THEIR SIX PRIORITY ACTION AREAS ARE: RECYCLING AND WASTE PREVENTION, GREEN PRODUCTS AND THEIR PROCUREMENT, ELECTRONICS STEWARDSHIP, SUSTAINABLE BUILDINGS, INDUSTRIAL ECOLOGY, AND ENVIRONMENTAL MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS. FOR MORE INFORMATION, PLEASE VISIT OUR WEBSITE WWW.OFEE.GOV.

Cleverdis: What is the USA situation in terms of WEEE? And what is the USA Government situation in terms of WEEE?

JH: Waste electronics and electrical equipment pose environmental risks and challenges in the United States, just as they do elsewhere. WEEE is the fastest growing waste stream in the U.S., and its recycling rate is low (only 14% in 1999). Governments, businesses, and non-governmental organizations are all interested in finding ways to better handle this waste stream. For FY2003, the federal government has budgeted approximately $50 billion for IT products and services. The U.S. federal government is actively seeking solutions to this concern. Through the significant efforts of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), the Department of Energy, and others, we are taking several important actions. For example, we are preparing the needed implementing legislation to finally ratify the Basel Convention, revising regulations to encourage greater recycling of cathode ray tubes (CRTs), funding research and development of improved electronics, partnering with businesses and state and local governments to identify and pilot appropriate end-of-life collection and recycling opportunities, setting energy efficient standards and issue Energy Star labels for electronics, and creating opportunities for industry and government to work together to find innovative answers to improve electronics across their entire life cycle. We even have federal facilities that are training prisoners to recycle electronic equipment. Under the National Electronics Product Stewardship Initiative (NEPSI), EPA and representatives from industry, government, and NGOs, are trying to develop a shared national system to finance the collection and recycling of electronics. Earlier this year, EPA initiated the “Plug-In to Recycling” campaign, which is a collaborative effort between EPA, OEMs, retailers, recyclers, states, local governments, and non-profits to educate American consumers about the importance and benefits of reusing and recycling their obsolete electronics. Another initiative, the Federal Electronics Challenge (FEC), is being developed to challenge federal agencies to purchase greener electronics and manage assets in an environmentally sound manner. And the U.S. Department of Defense has created the Demanufacturing of Electronic Equipment for Reuse and Recycling (DEER2) project to investigate, test, and deploy technology upgrades in the public and private sectors to encourage electronic equipment reuse and recycling.

Cleverdis: What is the USA state of the art concerning WEEE regulations?

JH: At the Federal level, EPA’s waste rules under the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (RCRA) subject all waste equipment to stringent management, transfer, and disposal requirements. The Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act (CERCLA) imposes liability on those who contributed to contamination that results from the disposal of waste. EPA has recently proposed a rule to encourage greater reuse, recycling,

and better management of CRTs. Several Presidential Executive Orders are relevant. Order 12999 encourages federal agencies to find others to use computer equipment they are no longer able to use, streamlining the transfer of its surplus computer equipment to other federal agencies, state and local governments, and schools and non-profit organizations. This helps reduce the number of computers that sit in storage and prolongs their useful life. Order 13101 directs federal agencies to prevent waste and recycle, and it encourages them to purchase environmentally preferable products. Order 13123 requires federal agencies to purchase energy efficient products. And President Bush's recent Order 13221 requires federal agencies to purchase products that use no more than one watt in their standby power-consuming mode, which standard is now being adopted by many around the world. The federal government is using more than its regulatory tools to address this issue. For example, the Environmental Protection Agency is offering some funding for various E-Cycling pilot projects in Mid-Atlantic states to assist with e-waste collection events, raise awareness, and identify how best to improve the needed infrastructure. In the U.S., states and even local governments play a very strong role in addressing environmental and energy issues. Generally, states adopt at least the federal standards and sometimes go even further. For example, some states have banned disposal of cathode ray tubes in landfills, and others have proposed legislation to require retailers, manufacturers, and consumers to help pay for recycling of discarded electronics. In addition, many voluntary initiatives and partnerships are forming to address the broad range of issues regarding the life cycle of electronics. For example, many producers now offer recycling services to their customers (for a range of fees) in the U.S. Together, we are optimistic that soon consumers and businesses in the U.S. will be able to purchase equipment that has been designed with fewer toxics, greater energy efficiency, and improved reusability – and that will at the end of their useful life be easily returnable at convenient, inexpensive outlets so they can be reused and recycled in an environmentally safe manner and with a robust market for those materials.

Cleverdis: What is the USA government strategy concerning WEEE disposal? Do you have an idea on the cost of green disposal of WEEE per item or yearly for the US Government?

JH: The U.S. federal government's strategy is to decrease the disposal rate of WEEE by extending the life cycle of these products – making them easier to be reused or recycled. The many particular initiatives to achieve this goal have already been noted above. Disposal costs are based on type and volume of equipment and range widely across the United States. Typical disposal rates range from $0.11 per pound to $0.14 per pound. These rates include the dismantling of the electronics but do not include collection and transportation costs.

Cleverdis: If we consider the recycling of monitors, how do you deal with it? What kind of difficulties are you dealing with?

JH: As noted above, EPA has proposed a new rule to better encourage the reuse and recycling, instead of landfilling, of CRTs. If reuse or repair is not a practical option, CRTs can be sent for recycling, which typically consists of disassembly for the purpose of recovering valuable materials, especially glass. A growing number of municipalities (some on their own, some with EPA support through its E-Cycling pilot collection events) are offering to collect computers and electronics for possible reuse or recycling. In addition, several public and private organizations now accept CRTs for the same purpose.
Dealing with leaded glass is a major end-of-life issue associated with CRTs as manufacturers generally use significant quantities of lead to make color CRTs.

Cleverdis: Will WEEE regulations be modified or influenced by the European WEEE Directives that have been currently adopted (where the producer of EEE is fully responsible for the financing and organization of the collection, treatment and recycling of WEEE)? If so what could be the impact of stricter regulations on both users and producers?

JH: Governments, businesses, and NGOs in the U.S. are, of course, aware of the European directives and interested in learning about how well they work in practice. We will continue to seek the most appropriate course for us here. Legislation has been introduced in the federal Congress and in several state legislatures to hold retailers and producers responsible for dealing with discarded electronics. And the U.S. NEPSI dialogue, noted above, is focusing its energy on "the development of a system, which includes a viable financing mechanism, to maximize the collection, reuse, and recycling of used electronics, while considering appropriate incentives to design products that facilitate source reduction, reuse and recycling; reduce toxicity; and increase recycled content." What sort of financing mechanism and all the details, including whether legislation would be needed, are the subject of much discussion now. At the moment, there are legislative, regulatory, and voluntary approaches being considered and tried throughout the U.S. by all the interested parties, and it is unclear what will be implemented, where, and to what degree.