The government has reduced the targets for electronics makers to collect e-waste. This may seem like another sop for the private sector, but given the amount of e-waste generated and its adverse impact on the environment, this is an important step towards making producers responsible for their products.

In 2016, the total weight of e-waste generated by the world was equal to 4,500 Eiffel Towers or 44.7 mt, according to the United Nations. As the fifth largest producer of e-waste in the world, India's contribution stood at nearly 2 mt. This is estimated to grow at 30 per cent per annum to reach 5.2 mt by 2020 as per an ASSOCHAM-cKinetics study.

Since the use of electronics, which are made of hazardous materials, is increasing at an alarming pace, the facilitation of environmentally sound e-waste management is a key priority. Around 80 per cent of e-waste – old laptops, cell phones, cameras, air conditioners, televisions, LED lamps, etc. – continues to be broken down, at huge health and environmental cost, by the informal sector. The irony is that most of the worn-out and discarded electronic goods are recyclable.

Rules of the game

Laws to manage e-waste have been in place since 2011. These mandate authorised dismantlers and recyclers to collect e-waste. The E-Waste (Management) Rules, 2016 added one more layer and put the responsibility for collecting e-waste from consumers and channelising it to authorised reprocessing units on to companies manufacturing electronic goods. The firms were required to meet yearly collection targets linked to their sales. Besides, these rules stated that companies making electronic equipment should restrict the use of hazardous metals such as mercury, lead and cadmium. The main aim was that by 2017, manufacturers, who accounted for the vast majority of e-waste, would outline targets as well as measures to collect their e-waste. These rules have now been amended in favour of manufacturers or producers.

The average life of a smartphone is five years and that of a feature phone is around seven years, according to the rules notified by the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change (MoEFCC). Therefore, when the product reaches the end of its life, the phone manufacturer must ensure proper collection of the phones. In addition, the company making these phones should reduce the use of hazardous materials in the manufacturing process.

This year's amendment reduces the e-waste collection targets of producers from 30 per cent in 2017-18 to 10 per cent, with an incremental increase of 10 per cent every year. In a first, new producers, who have started sales recently and include start-ups, have been brought under the new extended producer responsibility (EPR) regime. The e-waste collection target for them is 5 per cent (or above) of the total sales in 2016-17 for the recovery of e-waste in 2018-19.

The salient features of the E-Waste (Management) Amendment Rules, 2018 are as follows:

• The phase-wise collection target for e-waste (in terms of weight) is 10 per cent of the quantity of waste generated as indicated in the EPR plan in 2017-18, with a 10 per cent increase every year until 2023. From 2023 onwards, the target would be increased to 70 per cent of the quantity of waste generated. These will be applicable from October 1, 2017.

• The quantity of e-waste collected by producers from October 1, 2016 to September 30, 2017 will be factored into the revised EPR targets until March 2018.

• Separate e-waste collection targets have been drafted for new producers, that is, producers whose number of years of sales operations is less than the average life of their products. The average life of the products will be determined by the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) guidelines from time to time.

• Producer responsibility organisations (PROs) will have to apply to the CPCB for registration to undertake activities prescribed in the rules.

• Under the Reduction of Hazardous Substances (RoHS) provisions, the cost for sampling and testing for the RoHS test will be borne by the government. If the product does not comply with the RoHS provisions, the cost of the test will be borne by the producers.

Challenges

Currently, e-waste disposal is done entirely by the informal sector, despite the fact that e-waste handling, segregation and import are prohibited by law. In an attempt to eliminate the grey areas, the rules have been amended.

However, the challenges associated with e-waste management are huge. For instance, owing to technological advancements, devices such as computer monitors, CPUs, keyboards, printers, phones, television sets, cameras, electronic toys and batteries all become obsolete and turn into “e-waste” in no time.

In fact, e-waste from around the world finds its way to India and its neighbours, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Although the government has banned dismantling and recycling of e-waste inside Delhi, it is dumped into the alleyways of Mustafabad, Turkman Gate, Seelampur and Mayapuri in west Delhi. In fact, the death of a scrap dealer due to radiation from seven Cobalt 60 radioactive pencils shook the authorities, post which the environment ministry notified the E-Waste (Management and Handling) Rules in 2011.

The e-waste is segregated, prised apart, put through acid wash and burnt to extract anything of value. The rest is put into a drain where corrosive chemicals like nickel, cadmium, mercury and lead leach into the soil and the water table below.

Efforts are under way to formalise the e-waste sector and there has been some success. Companies like RLG India, Greentek Reman and 3R RecycleR provide services for collection, recycling and disposal of electronic products. In fact, RLG India manages and operates the PRO “Clean India Electronics Recycling Platform” to provide producers with a sustainable, reliable and efficient option to comply with their extended producer obligations as prescribed in the CPCB’s Implementation Guidelines for E-Waste (Management) Rules.

Greater Noida-based Greentek has a huge e-waste processing facility where it recycles e-waste and disposes it of for reuse, end-of-life demanufacture and recycling. Electronic trash not suitable for reuse, such as computer monitors, old televisions and cell phones, are disassembled to the component level and each material recovered is sorted to be converted back into raw material for manufacturing new products. In some cases, reuse or recycling is difficult. Such waste is disposed of at properly licensed and permitted facilities. Greentek reportedly has clearances and certifications from the state pollution control board as well as the

MoEFCC for safe disposal of e-waste.

The other Delhi–based recycling company, 3R RecycleR, deals with a wide spectrum of activities covered under e-waste management – collection of e-waste from the doorsteps of generators, segregation, data destruction, dismantling of end-of-life equipment, size reduction, sorting into different materials such as glass, plastic, iron/steel, aluminium, copper and hazardous material.

With the new amendment, the targets seem more achievable with a greater involvement of the organised sector. It is perhaps time for India to consider deploying the cheaper e-waste recycling robots that are being devised in the West.

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