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## REPORT ON GREEN SOLUTIONS: WASTE REDUCTION: BATTERIES

### 'Toxic little time bombs'

Why, when it comes to batteries, are we recycling failures? Ontario wants to change that

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Ontario residents are champions of blue-box recycling. But when it comes to recycling batteries, they barely enter the race.

Each year in Ontario about 5,000 tonnes of single-use batteries are discarded. Of those, less than 250 tonnes, about 5 per cent, are recycled.

Environmentalists, Queen's Park and even officials in the battery industry say Ontario residents need to recycle many more household batteries. The question is: how to stop people from chucking batteries in the trash? Some people throw out batteries because they don't realize the dangers, says Rod Muir, waste diversion campaigner for the Sierra Club of Canada. Batteries "are toxic little time bombs." Some contain heavy metals, such as cadmium, lead, chromium and mercury.

When batteries wind up in a landfill, the heavy metals can leach into the ground and find their way into the water system. Heavy metals are toxic to biological systems and affect brain activity or metabolic processes. Ignorance about these risks is partly why people throw out batteries. The other main reason is that it's not convenient to recycle them.

Across the entire province, there are fewer than 100 municipal drop-off sites where people can bring batteries for safe disposal. Toronto's six drop-off depots are open just two days a week. The current system is "simply inadequate," Mr. Muir says.

Queen's Park agrees. That's why the province is implementing a province-wide system for recycling household batteries and collecting other hazardous household waste.

Under the Municipal Hazardous or Special Waste program, any municipality, business, school or other organization that collects discarded batteries for recycling will no longer pay the shipping and recycling costs.

Stewardship Ontario, an industry funding organization, will pick up the tab. It will pay for batteries to be shipped to a recycling facility and then for the batteries' components to be extracted for other uses. Funds for the program will come from fees paid by companies that manufacture batteries in Ontario or import batteries to the province.

The first phase of the program, which kicked off in July, includes single-use batteries. The second phase, which is not yet approved by Environment Minister John Gerretsen, will include all others, except lead acid batteries from vehicles.

More municipalities, as well as stores that sell batteries, will be encouraged to collect them for recycling because they won't have to pay the shipping and recycling costs themselves, says Derek Stephenson, Stewardship Ontario's senior policy adviser.

Expect to see several thousand collection sites across the province, Mr. Stephenson says. Where municipalities don't collect batteries for recycling, "Stewardship Ontario is required to provide that service."

Toronto will benefit. Right now, single-use batteries brought to the city's drop-off sites are disposed of safely, but not recycled, says Geoff Rathbone, general manager of Toronto's Solid Waste Management Services.

Soon, single-use batteries the city collects will be recycled through Stewardship Ontario. And as of January, the city will use the money it saves through the program to open its drop-off depots five days a week, up from two days a week, Mr. Rathbone says.

Reactions to the new program have been mixed. Jo-Anne St. Godard, executive director of the Recycling Council of Ontario, likes that the program has guidelines to ensure that recycling facilities meet high environmental standards.

She also likes that there are recycling targets and timelines. For example, Stewardship Ontario must collect 25 per cent of all batteries sold in Ontario by the fifth year of the program and recycle at least 50 per cent of the materials in those batteries.

If the target isn't met, the government can order Stewardship Ontario to take certain actions, including providing more collection sites.

But some environmentalists say the program doesn't go far enough. A battery recycling program should require - not just encourage - stores that sell batteries to take them back for recycling, Mr. Muir says.

The province should develop a deposit system for batteries, says Chris Winter, the Conservation Council of Ontario's executive director. If people knew a used battery was worth money, they'd be more likely to return it.

When it comes to recycling, Ontario residents "don't need to be motivated by money. They understand there is an environmental reason for doing this," says Glenda Gies, executive director of Waste Diversion Ontario, a provincial agency that helps design and monitor industry-funded waste diversion programs, including those run by Stewardship Ontario.

Still, if Stewardship Ontario doesn't meet its collection or recycling targets, the government can direct it to "pay financial incentives to encourage more recycling," Mr. Stephenson says.

Environmentalists say ideally they'd like a Canada-wide battery recycling program. Across Canada in 2004 only 2 per cent of single-use batteries and 5 per cent of rechargeable batteries were recycled, Environment Canada found. Unfortunately, the federal government has little to do with waste diversion, Mr. Muir says.

Parliament could create a national program if it wanted to, says Franz Hartmann, the Toronto Environmental Alliance's executive director. Last month new rules came into force in the European Union requiring member states to collect 25 per cent of discarded household batteries by 2012 and 45 per cent in 2016.

A province-wide system in Ontario where municipalities and businesses are encouraged to collect batteries for recycling is a beginning.

"It's just that until we're at a point where the vast majority of batteries end up being recycled ... that's not good enough," Mr. Hartmann says. "It means there are still huge amounts of batteries ending up in landfill sites and contaminating the environment."