

2-11-2010

# Cell Phone Recycling

Maine Department of Environmental Protection

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STATE OF MAINE  
DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

DAVID P. LITTELL  
COMMISSIONER

JOHN ELIAS BALDACCI  
GOVERNOR

February 11, 2010

Senator Seth A. Goodall, Senate Chair  
Representative Robert S. Duchesne, House Chair  
Joint Standing Committee on Natural Resources  
Cross office Building Room 214  
Augusta, Maine 04333-003

Re: Update report to the Legislature on cell phone recycling in Maine

Dear Senator Goodall, Representative Dushesne and Members of the Natural Resources Committee:

In 2007 the 123<sup>rd</sup> Legislature enacted P.L. Chapter 343, *An Act to Promote Recycling of Cellular Telephones*. This law requires anyone who sells a cellular telephone at retail to provide free collection of cell phones for recycling. It also established a disposal ban to encourage recycling. Unwanted cell phones have a positive monetary value: some can be refurbished and resold or donated for charitable uses, and the remainder processed into commodities that are used to make new products.

P.L. Chapter 343 requires cellular telephone service providers to report annually on the number of cell phones they recycled the previous year, and how the collected cellular telephones were disposed of, reused or recycled. In addition, by February 1, 2009 and every year thereafter until February 1, 2013, the department is required to report on the collection system to the joint standing committee on natural resources. This report contains information on the cell phone collection system and data on cell phone collections in 2009.

### Collection data

In 2009, there were five cellular telephone (wireless) service providers operating in Maine: AT&T Wireless, Sprint/Nextel, T-Mobile, U.S. Cellular, and Verizon (Verizon purchased UniceL in 2007). Each of these wireless service providers offers a free cell phone recycling program that provides support to charities, either through donation of refurbished phones and/or through monetary donations from the profit made from the recycling of cell phones. Although none of the wireless service providers' reports specify the percentage of cell phones refurbished for reuse vs. the percentage recycled into material commodities, ReCellular, a commonly-used cell phone recycler refurbished and reused about 65% of the phones received for recycling from Maine, and recycled the other 35% into commodity materials.

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The 2009 cell phone collection data reported by the wireless service providers is not easily comparable to the 2008 data. This is due to the service providers reporting recycling numbers on an inconsistent basis (i.e., one year some reported estimated based on national numbers and the other year they reported actual) and the fact that retail locations under the UniceL name ceased operations in the state in 2009.

**Data from wireless service providers’ 2008 and 2009 annual reports**

Wireless Service Provider	Number of Maine retail locations		Number of cell phones reported recycled in Maine		Recycling program
	2008	2009	2008	2009	
AT&T Wireless (includes Cingular)	8	9	22,639*	17,111*	AT&T Reuse & Recycle
Rural Cellular Corporation (UniceL)	44	Decreased to 0	15,317	522	2009 from RBRC report
Sprint/Nextel	1	1 plus 2 authorized dealers	none reported	7,442*	Sprint Project Connect
T-Mobile	2	0	Do not track	Do not track	T-Mobile “Huddle-Up”
U.S. Cellular	13	16 plus 21 authorized agents	511*	9023	US Cellular (contracted to RMS Communications)
Verizon	10	10	4094	9617*	Verizon’s HopeLine
<b>Totals</b>	<b>82</b>	<b>varied</b>	<b>48,229</b>	<b>43,715</b>	

\*Estimated

As part of its corporate sustainability drive, Sprint/Nextel has announced a long-term goal for cell phone collections, with a target of collecting nine phones for every ten they sell by 2017. Sprint/Nextel recognizes that consumers may need incentives to turn in their old phones, and so offers a “buy back” program to loyal customers.

Many cell phones are turned in for recycling at locations other than the service provider retail locations. The most common program available is the Rechargeable Battery Recycling Corporation’s Call2Recycle (rebranded from “RBRC” to better reflect that it accepts cell phones as well as rechargeable batteries). Call2Recycle has collection boxes at 712 locations in Maine, 40 more locations than in 2008. Four hundred eleven of the Call2Recycle boxes are at retail locations, including the stores of several of the retail chains subject to the collection program requirement (Rite Aid, RadioShack, Best Buy and Wal-Mart) and many of the independent cell phones stores to whom the law also applies. In addition Call2Recycle has provided collection boxes to 139 municipalities, with the vast majority of these located at solid waste facilities and recycling centers. ReCellular is another common recycling program that tracks cell phone recycling data by state. Cell phone recycled from Maine through the Call2Recycle and ReCellular programs increased almost 36% in 2009 compared with 2008.

### Data from independent cell phone recyclers

Recycling program	Number of Sites 2008	Number of Sites 2009	Pounds of Cell Phones 2008	Pounds of Cell Phones 2009	Number of Cell Phones 2008	Number of Cell Phones 2009
Call2Recycle	672	712	708	903	2507	4146
ReCellular	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	7135	8955
<b>Totals</b>					<b>9642</b>	<b>13,101</b>

#### Measuring program performance

The cell phone recycling program performance can be measured in a variety of ways. The ideal measurement is the amount of available product recycled, i.e., the percentage of product available as waste that is recycled. However, of the many cell phones recycling programs available to consumers, most do not track where the cell phones they receive come from, so it is not possible to obtain an accurate accounting of the number of cell phones recycled from Maine. Over time we can use the data we obtain from the wireless service providers and the Call2Recycle and ReCellular programs to measure the general trend in recycling of cell phones in Maine, i.e., whether the number of cell phones recycled is increasing, decreasing or remaining relatively flat. The first two years of data do not show a significant increase in the number of cell phones recycled through these collection providers, with gains in the Call2Recycle and ReCellular programs offsetting decreases from the wireless service providers.

Other measures of program performance are the convenience of recycling collection, and consumer awareness of the need to recycle and how to recycle their cell phones (convenience of recycling collection and consumer knowledge are the greatest drivers for the success of any recycling program). As reflected in the number and location of collection sites, Maine’s law has been successful in ensuring a free, widely-accessible collection infrastructure. Currently we have no data on consumer awareness of the need to recycle cell phones and how to recycle cell phones. During the next year, the DEP will examine ways to address this data gap.

Even given a convenient collection system and consumer knowledge, consumers need to be motivated to recycle their cell phones. The private marketplace provides consumers with opportunities to support popular charities (e.g., Cell Phones for Soldiers) and to obtain some financial pay back for turning a cell phone in for recycling (see [www.pacebutler.com](http://www.pacebutler.com) and [www.sprint.com](http://www.sprint.com) “Upgrade your phone”). The data we obtain from Sprint over the next several years will provide us some information as to the effect a monetary incentive may have on cell phone recycling rates.

#### Conclusion

Maine’s new cell phone law has resulted in the successful establishment of a convenient collection system for Maine consumers. The next challenge is to assure that consumers know about the system and are motivated to recycle their old cell phones. DEP is continuing its

outreach to retailers to ensure they post a clearly visible sign about their free recycling service. Also, DEP and SPO will continue working with our municipal partners to educate local residents on the need to recycle cell phones at the end of life. Additional efforts will be made as resources are available.

Please contact me at 207-287-7720 or at [carole.a.cifrino@maine.gov](mailto:carole.a.cifrino@maine.gov) if you have any questions about this report or the implementation of Maine's cell phone recycling law.

Sincerely,

Carole Cifrino, Product Management Program Manager  
Division of Solid Waste/Bureau of Remediation & Waste Management