



Highlights of [GAO-10-196T](#), a testimony before the Subcommittee on Government Management, Organization, and Procurement, Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, House of Representatives

Why GAO Did This Study

Advancing technology has led to increasing sales of new electronic devices. With this increase comes the dilemma of managing them at the end of their useful lives. If discarded with common trash, a number of environmental impacts may result, ranging from the loss of valuable resources to the potential release of toxic substances, such as lead. If recycled, they may be exported to countries with waste management systems that are less protective of human health and the environment than those of the United States.

The federal government is the world's largest purchaser of electronics, spending nearly \$75 billion on electronic products and services in 2009. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has helped implement several product stewardship initiatives to encourage responsible management of electronic products in all three phases of a product's lifecycle—procurement, operation, and end-of-life disposal. In response to a request to provide information on federal procurement and management of electronic products, GAO's testimony describes (1) EPA's electronic product stewardship initiatives, (2) federal agency participation in them, and (3) opportunities for strengthening participation. GAO's testimony is based on its prior work and updated with data from EPA. In our prior report, EPA agreed that increasing federal participation in its initiatives could be encouraged. Agency officials still agree with this finding.

[View GAO-10-196T or key components.](#)
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FEDERAL ELECTRONICS MANAGEMENT

Federal Agencies Could Improve Participation in EPA's Initiatives for Environmentally Preferable Products

What GAO Found

Federal government approaches to ensuring environmentally responsible management of electronic equipment from procurement through disposal rely heavily on two interrelated initiatives. The first initiative, the electronic product environmental assessment tool (EPEAT®), was developed along the lines of EPA's and the Department of Energy's Energy Star program and assists federal procurement officials in comparing and selecting computers and monitors with environmental attributes that also routinely save money through reduced energy usage over the products' lives. The second initiative—the federal electronics challenge (FEC)—helps federal agencies realize the benefits of EPEAT-rated electronics by providing resources to help agencies extend these products' life spans, operate them in an energy efficient way, and expand markets for recovered materials by recycling them at end of life.

The first 5 years of EPA's initiatives have resulted in notable energy savings and environmental benefits reported by participating agencies. According to facilities that reported information to EPA and the Office of the Federal Environmental Executive in 2008, 88 percent of all desktop computers, laptop computers, and monitors the facilities purchased or leased were EPEAT-registered. EPEAT participation reportedly resulted in procurement officials purchasing 95 percent of their monitors with Energy Star power management features enabled and 38 percent of computers with this feature. In addition, 16 federal agencies and 215 federal facilities—representing about one-third of all federal employees—participated in the FEC to some extent in 2008. As a result, participants reported that 50 percent of electronics taken out of service were donated for reuse, 40 percent were recycled, 8 percent were sold, and 2 percent were disposed of. The environmentally responsible choices associated with EPEAT and FEC resulted in a reported \$40.3 million in cost savings for participants.

The EPEAT and FEC accomplishments are steps in the right direction, but opportunities exist to increase the breadth and depth of federal participation. First, agencies and facilities representing about two-thirds of the federal workforce are not participating in these promising initiatives, despite instructions to do so in implementing Executive Order 13423. Second, few participating agencies and facilities maximize these programs' resources and their potential benefits. For some, participation simply means the agency identified its current practices for managing electronic products and set goals to improve them. Moreover, as the FEC aims to support participating agencies and facilities, it does not impose consequences for those that do not meet their goals. In fact, only 34 FEC facility partners showed they managed electronic products in 2008 in accordance with FEC goals for at least one of the three lifecycle phases, and only 2 facilities showed they did so for all phases. For perspective, GAO calculated that if federal agencies replaced 500,000 desktop and laptop computers and monitors with EPEAT-registered products and operated and disposed of them in accordance with FEC goals, they could achieve substantially greater energy reductions and cost savings.