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## California's 'green' ink-cartridge recycling fails to cut pollution, or costs

By Tom Knudson  
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On paper, the recycling program was touted as a bold step toward California's green, climate-friendly future.

A mountain of plastic and metal would be diverted from landfills. Greenhouse gas emissions would tumble. And one of Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's [climate change](#) goals – trimming power use in state buildings by 20 percent – would nudge closer to reality as agencies snapped up new, more efficient office printers.

That is what state and Hewlett-Packard officials said last year when they joined forces to ship used HP printer ink cartridges from state offices to Virginia to be ground up and recycled into auto parts, serving trays, clothes hangers and other products.

But a Bee investigation, based on more than 100 pages of e-mails and other records, has found that 17 months after it was created, the program has delivered few if any of its promised climate benefits.

Almost from the start it ran into opposition from the state's purchasing specialists at the Department of General Services, who were not consulted about it and who – once they started asking questions – turned up other concerns, including allegations of unfair competition and ink waste.

They also favored reusing cartridges by refilling them at local businesses, a process known as remanufacturing.

"It is to HP's advantage to get as many remanufacturable cartridges off the market as possible," Robert Tetz, manager of the department's environmentally preferable purchasing program, said

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"Often in efforts to make the Governor look good, the agency heads (who are appointed by the Gov), just go along with a bad idea. This is the primary reason many state worker's do not blow the whistle when it comes to waste and other unethical acts, especially by upper management. You end up "black listed" or similar tactics are used against you, such as what happened to Mr. Tetz. When you attempt to address problems through the proper chain of command, the managers protect each other and the employee has to transfer to another unit or agency, instead of the bad managers being disciplined or removed. Sadly, they continue to get away with this type of behavior, including promoting their friends (even when they are unqualified for the job)."

-- phylnit

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in an e-mail to his boss last year. "I don't believe that this partnership arrangement passes the smell test."

The recycling plan is one of many purportedly eco-friendly initiatives launched in California, a state that portrays itself as a green-minded model for the world. But Scot Case, who investigates green marketing claims, said the state HP plan is the wrong choice for the environment.

"It is completely ridiculous to ship a product from California to Virginia to be reground when you could refill those cartridges in California and reuse them," said Case, vice president of TerraChoice Environmental Marketing, which places the green "EcoLogo" label on thousands of consumer products – but not on new printer cartridges.

"You would use fewer resources," Case said. "And you would create significantly less global warming impacts."

For their part, most DGS employees are not free to speak to The Bee. "We have a policy that we have high-level spokespeople ... respond to questions," said Jeffrey Young, the agency's deputy director of public affairs.

And Tetz, the green purchasing manager, has been ordered to clam up. "Bob, per my voicemail, I need you to stand down on any communication with Mr. Knudson. Call me ..." Jim Butler, DGS' chief procurement officer, said in an e-mail.

But their views come through clearly in electronic correspondence.

"The bottom line is that it is environmentally preferable and fiscally prudent to buy remanufactured toner cartridges for state laser printers from California small businesses," wrote Ben Martin, an engineering branch manager at DGS, in an e-mail to a colleague.

### Targeting a river of waste

Printer cartridges are a mainstay of the modern office – and a vexing waste problem. One 2007 industry report estimated 46 percent of the larger kind, known as laser jet cartridges, and 84 percent of the smaller inkjet cartridges are dumped in landfills after one use. A follow-up study, commissioned by HP, found 34 percent of the company's laser jet cartridges and 78 percent of its inkjets end up in landfills after one use.

The state-HP recycling effort was aimed at shrinking that river of waste by diverting up to 100 tons of spent state cartridges from landfills every year. But state and HP officials said it would have an additional benefit, striking a blow against climate change by curbing greenhouse gas emissions by 500 tons annually.

Here's how it was supposed to work: For every HP cartridge purchased and recycled, state agencies would earn points toward buying new, more energy-efficient HP printers. Top officials said that would trim power use and slice pollution.

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Call The Bee's Tom Knudson, (530) 582-5336.

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**FANFARE100** wrote on 09/28/2009 10:42:30 PM:

the refilled printer cartridges we buy off the DGS list have a failure rate that is astronomical. We feel pain for the taxpayer who pays for our time to change cartridges multiple times because they dump toner all over the inside of printers. As for the part in the story about all three cartridges have to be changed on a 5500 - that is pure bunk. I think there is an ulterior motive to this story because that is a lie - I can't tell you how many times we change just one cartridge in a laserjet 5500 because each color reports seperately. AND we wait until they run out which iconically is always about when they report - 0- percent. This story is a fabrication from my viewpoint. I wonder if someone wants to sell some refilled cartridges to the state at the taxpayers' expense. No, I do not work for HP and I support about 50 printers on a daily basis.

 [Recommend \(5\)](#)



**GenXer** wrote on 09/28/2009 05:44:42 PM:

I take my ink cartridges to Costco and get them refilled. I have an HP printer and I don't have \$\$\$ to buy new ones every time I need a cartridge. Why do they cost so much?? My daughter's school has a recycling program, which brings in money for the school. I really didn't know this was not a very effective program.

Maybe we should return to the mimeograph machine. Am I dating myself?? I'm not THAT old!

 [Recommend \(0\)](#)



**Scott\_at\_HP** wrote on 09/28/2009 03:47:36 PM:

Hello, I'm Scott from HP (quoted above) and I'd like to add a few points that I think will help give a balanced look at this issue. The intent of the program was to help the State do several things: 1) upgrade its less efficient, decade-old printers with newer models that use less power and have more environmental features, like automatic two-sided printing; 2) move to higher-capacity, lower cost per page HP cartridges; and 3) facilitate agency fulfillment of cartridge recycling and reporting requirements by providing shipping boxes and reports about cartridge returns. Similar programs have been successful with other customers, like UC Davis and 3M. The program still has the potential to substantially reduce cost and

environmental impact in State Agencies.

The question of whether to use Original HP cartridges or remanufactured alternatives is an important decision on the path to optimizing printing. More info is available at:

<http://www.hp.com/canada/corporate/recycle/reman.pdf>

 [Recommend \(10\)](#)



**bcooper530** wrote on 09/28/2009 10:05:22 AM:

HP will be added to the list of AB32 taxes for them and their CONSUMERS for it's wastfull ways.

 [Recommend \(0\)](#)



**remallory** wrote on 09/28/2009 09:57:38 AM:

Please all, picture what has happened here. We had two options. Both had positive and negative arguments. The government had lots of meetings, spent lots of money on attorney opinions and economic justifications, and DID NOTHING! Isn't this the fundamental problem of our state government? It spends money on fine salaries and benefits, and then makes no decision whatsoever! And apparently, no one sees this as a problem! We are all chumps if we are happy to talk about villains and good guys, and what a shame that "our side" did not win. We need a public that understands that compromise and completing decisions that create real world actions is the only way to effectively govern! Not all of us win every time but we all lose everytime if all we do is shout and block action. This is what our legislature is modeling. Please let's all focus on making someone responsible for something, and actually DOING something - not just spending money and having a good argument.

 [Recommend \(4\)](#)



**MorningConstitutional** wrote on 09/28/2009 08:54:17 AM:

Why is the Bee suddenly so concerned about State employees trying to protect the public's interest?

Last we heard from your Editorial Board, you were singing the praises of State employee furloughs and contracting out for public services.

This is what you get...a bunch of the Governor's lackeys signing deals that enrich private contractors on the taxpayer's dime.

Enjoy.

 [Recommend \(9\)](#)



**lawrenceturner** wrote on 09/28/2009 06:36:28 AM:

Government, most of the time, is directed by special interests in the hope of decreed profit.

This was stupid. Better to refill and reuse!

 [Recommend \(2\)](#)



**lucky linda** wrote on 09/27/2009 11:38:48 PM:

I think that this article needs to look at the whole picture on ink cartridges, and not just the State of California's ink problem. HP's Ink cartridge recycling program is a very bad way to getting rid of landfill pile-up.

I for one use Epson Ink cartridges for my printer, and because Epson does not have a recycle program; I end up just throwing them in the trash.

The Governor needs to install a General Ink recycling program for ALL ink cartridges, and make it for California only. Maybe our own recycling plants could do that here in California.

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