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THE
7.30
REPORT

Phone recycling claims called into doubt

Reporter: Mark Bannerman

MAXINE McKEW: With Christmas shopping now in full swing, it's predicted that sales of mobile phones for this year will hit the seven million mark.

But it's what happens to the ones we throw away that has many environmental groups worried.

The Australian Mobile Telecommunications Association says it has a best practice recycling program aimed at minimising toxic pollution from discarded phones.

But as Mark Bannerman reveals tonight, the mobile phone industry has been caught out, with some of the crucial claims it makes to hype its recycling program having little basis in fact.

MARK BANNERMAN: They're compact, they're colourful, they've become our lifeline to the world, but like all good things, they come to an end.

The question is: what do we do with our mobile phones when they've outlived their usefulness?

PASSERBY #1: I don't know.

Where do they go?

It's like the old videos, where do they go?

PASSERBY #2: Oh, they're probably sitting in a drawer somewhere.

PASSERBY #3: I don't know.

At home, still, most of them.

PASSERBY #4: Still sitting in a cupboard at home.

JANE CASTLE, TOTAL ENVIRONMENT CENTRE: Mobile phones are very toxic cocktails of a whole lot of chemicals - you've got arsenic, cadmium, mercury, lead, different sorts of toxic plastics.

When they're in one little packet, they comprise of a little time bomb.

MARK BANNERMAN: Little wonder environmental groups are concerned.

Propelled by an aggressive advertising campaign, Australians have purchased over 40 million mobile phones in the past decade.

7 million mobile phones will be sold this year.

The danger comes when they end up here and, despite all the best efforts, get churned into landfill.

PETER STEPHENSON, KIMBRIKI RECYCLING CENTRE: The frequency of the phones has increased in recent times.

They were a rarity, now they're more common.

When we extract them, we actually send them off for reprocessing, but there are still a number which come into the landfill which we don't actually capture.

JANE CASTLE: The toxic chemicals from those phones end up leaching out of those phones and going into the groundwater of the system and right back into our whole agricultural and urban system.

MARK BANNERMAN: Six years ago, the Australian Mobile Telecommunications Association, or AMTA, saw this problem coming.

Forging an alliance with environment groups, including Planet Ark, they set about creating a ground-breaking mobile phone recycling program financed by a levy on the phone industry.

GRAHAM CHALKER, AUSTRALIAN MOBILE TELECOMMUNICATIONS ASSOCIATION: We started in the year 2000 and we've increased tonnages considerably over that period.

And, in fact, in many other countries our scheme is seen as a model.

MARK BANNERMAN: But now it seems that formidable partnership has fallen apart.

If you had to give marks out of 10 for what's been doing in the last year, in particular, most recently, how many would they get?

JON DEE, PLANET ARK: I think they'd get 1 out of 10 from Planet Ark.

JANE CASTLE: It is a seriously bad voluntary industry program that has basically hit rock bottom.

GRAHAM CHALKER: That came as a bit of a surprise when some of those people, and particularly Planet Ark, decided to attack us in the last week.

It was only last week - in fact, last month - that in National Recycling Week we were commended for being a world leader in this area.

MARK BANNERMAN: Jon Dee is the head of Planet Ark.

Once a partner in the recycling program, he says he became concerned when AMTA told him it was winding back its public awareness campaign and ceasing collection of the industry levy.

But his main criticism is even more fundamental.

The scheme, he says, is simply not recycling enough phones.

JON DEE: The performance of the industry mobile phone recycling program is extremely poor.

By the industry's own admission, there are 10 million or more defunct mobile phones.

There are 12 million mobile phone users and this year alone they've sold 7 million mobile phones, yet they've only recycled about 100,000 of those.

MARK BANNERMAN: Let's talk this year.

You've sold 7 million phones and you've had returned around 100,000, it's estimated.

GRAHAM CHALKER: Sorry, and you're saying that's not sufficient at the moment?

MARK BANNERMAN: Well, it's 1 per cent.

GRAHAM CHALKER: Well, we're in the process of having a look at where those phones have all gone.

The issue, while we're undertaking the consumer research, is that we're not quite sure where all those phones are at the moment.

MARK BANNERMAN: In this debate, the environment groups have found a powerful ally, it seems.

JOHN THWAITES, VICTORIAN ENVIRONMENT MINISTER: I don't think the mobile phone recycling program is working as well as it should.

There are about 7 million mobile phones that are being purchased every year and most of those are ending up being dumped or in landfill.

So, clearly, there does need to be an improvement.

MARK BANNERMAN: But raw numbers are not the only point of contention between the warring parties.

For some time now, Planet Ark's John Dee has been concerned that AMTA was overstating the amount of material recycled from phones.

In particular, he became concerned when he heard this news report.

RADIO PRESENTER, 5DN RADIO NEWS, ADELAIDE, (NOVEMBER 29, 2004): Randall Markey from the Australian Mobile Telecommunications Association says almost 1.5 million handsets and batteries have been recycled so far this year.

RANDAL MARKEY, MANAGER, COMMUNICATIONS, AMTA: The products are actually recycled and used as a whole range of other things such as the production of steel and cadmium from the process is used in new batteries and plastics are used in furniture.

MARK BANNERMAN: In fact, the number of mobile phones recycled this year is now just over 100,000, not the 1.2 million claimed.

And there is now evidence that the plastic from phone handsets has not been recycled at all.

Is the plastic for phones recycled or is it used for landfill?

GRAHAM CHALKER: Some of it is being used in things like garden furniture, some of it in traffic areas.

The difficulty that most people in the recycling game tell us with plastics in the electronic area is in fact that secondary plastic needs to be quite pure and the contaminants that come in sometimes make it very difficult to actually recycle it.

MARK BANNERMAN: So has any furniture or traffic items ever been made from the plastic from mobile phones?

GRAHAM CHALKER: As far as I'm aware, it certainly has.

MARK BANNERMAN: In fact, the industry's chosen recycler, MRI, told us mobile phone plastics were not being recycled for furniture.

Indeed, until two months ago, it had been placed in landfill.

GRAHAM CHALKER: I'm not sure what MRI have told you.

I would have to check that up later.

MARK BANNERMAN: True to his word, Graham Chalker did check the facts and a short time after the interview sent the 7:30 Report this statement: "AMTA acknowledges it incorrectly claimed recently that some plastics from the process of recycling mobile phones are used in the production of furniture.

AMTA regrets its mistake.

We only became aware of the facts on Tuesday, December 7th, 2004 after the issue was raised by the 7:30 Report."

JON DEE: Well, frankly, from Planet Ark's point of view, we can't trust anything at the moment that AMTA is saying to either us or to the general public.

MARK BANNERMAN: Until now, governments have stayed well out of the mobile phone recycling debate.

Today though the Victorian Government issued this not-so-veiled warning.

JOHN THWAITES: We do need a significant increase in the level of recycling.

If we don't come up with a satisfactory result through the industry scheme, then ministers around Australia will have to look at it and introduce targets as we have, for example, with plastic bags.

MARK BANNERMAN: This might delight environmental groups.

Industry, though, will not be so impressed.

One thing for certain, though, with so many new phones coming on line, recycling needs a big boost to prevent a major environmental problem in the future.

MAXINE McKEW: It certainly does, with seven million projected sales.

Mark Bannerman with that report.