

A danger call to mobile users

Inside the old phone battery that you're about to throw away are substances that could prove very lethal to us all

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Thailand's favourite toy, the mobile phone, is turning out to be one of its most hazardous. Apart from the general nuisance value, it seems discarded batteries from mobiles are proving to be an environmental disaster in the making.

Last year alone, there were a total of 13 million old batteries discarded by users. These batteries contain the toxic metallic elements cadmium and manganese which can cause cancers if they are dumped improperly.

Consequently, the Waste and Hazardous Substances Management Bureau, which comes under the Environment and Natural Resources Ministry, is working with the major mobile phone companies to launch a nation-wide campaign to recover millions of these old batteries from users in a bid to dispose

the toxic materials correctly.

Sophon Tatichotiphan, the bureau's director, told *The Nation* that the campaign is expected to be launched in the next few months with a budget of Bt15 million in co-operation with Advanced Info Service (AIS) and DTAC, the country's two largest mobile phone service providers.

Sophon said if toxic materials like cadmium and manganese are dissolved into the country's waterways, they could prove to be very dangerous to the public.

As an indication of the potential for a disaster, Thailand has a total of 22-23 million cell phone users and the number continues to grow day by day, resulting in more and more old batteries. On average, a battery lasts between two and three years.

Sophon said the bureau currently has three contractors managing the disposal of these hazardous wastes.

But there is still a lack of widespread public awareness of the need to dispose of old batteries safely. Hence, large numbers of expired batteries are simply thrown out with the normal garbage, offering up the potential for them to gradually leak the dangerous chemicals into the soil and then into the water table.

Sophon said if the planned campaign is not effective in encouraging the public to return old batteries to distributors, the bureau will consider drafting regulations to require the recall of all expired batteries.

But it's not just old cell phone batteries that are causing concern, he said. Spray bottles and styrofoam containers, among others, also contain poisonous substances which have to be collected separately from general household waste.

"Currently, we manage these toxic substances by dumping them

into restricted landfill or underground storage sites. As for cadmium and manganese, we have to recondition them to remove the toxic elements," he said.

Just recently, the World Bank issued a report warning that Thailand's general waste management is still ineffective. Sinchai Thiansiri, director of the Thai Environmental and Community Development Association, better known as Magic Eyes, said the lack of consistent government policy had contributed to the issue.

"Today's lifestyle which favour convenience such as widespread consumption of fast food has resulted in more rubbish," he said, adding that the authorities concerned should step up campaigns to promote the concept of the five Rs as a means to reduce the aggregate amount of waste in the country.

The five-R model emphasises reuse (that is, using, cloth containers in place of plastic bags), recycle (aluminium cans, for example), reduce, reject (foam containers) and respond (separating garbage, cleaning up food containers before disposal).



MUNICIPAL WORKERS remove garbage from a Bangkok canal. Among the items they often find are discarded batteries from mobile phones which leak dangerous chemicals as they deteriorate.

Such a campaign needs cooperation from schools, businesses and public waste-management organisations, he noted.

Recently, Magic Eyes also

launched programmes to increase public awareness on how to keep the environment clean at Future Park shopping centre in Rangsit and a number of schools.

“These programmes received good feedback from communities and businesses concerned such as restaurant chains like McDonald’s, KFC and MK Suki,” he said.