

Why GAO Did This Study

DOD routinely disposes of electronics, including items such as computers, cell phones, and copiers, as well as electronics in weapon systems and other equipment. While some usable items are reused, transferred, or donated to other entities, the remaining electronic waste is sent to recyclers. Electronic waste may contain materials that can be recovered, which can reduce the need to procure them through other sources. DLA disposes of DOD's electronic waste.

Senate Report 114-49 and House Report 114-102 include provisions for GAO to review matters related to the disposal of DOD electronics and efforts to recover materials from them. This report discusses (1) the extent of DOD's electronic waste that is processed and the types of materials that are recovered from it and (2) DOD's efforts to assess potential opportunities to expand its recovery efforts and factors that could affect expansion. GAO reviewed guidance on electronics disposal, analyzed data on the amount of waste processed and materials recovered, obtained information on efforts to expand material recovery, and interviewed officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that DLA take steps to ensure that strategic and critical materials are included in the development of DOD material declaration standards and guidance. DOD concurred with GAO's recommendation.

View [GAO-16-576](#). For more information, contact Zina Merritt at (202) 512-5257 or merrittz@gao.gov.

ELECTRONIC WASTE

DOD Is Recovering Materials, but Several Factors May Hinder Near-Term Expansion of These Efforts

What GAO Found

The Defense Logistics Agency (DLA) processes tens of millions of pounds of Department of Defense (DOD) electronic waste annually and recovers some materials from this waste, including precious metals and one material—germanium—that is being added to the National Defense Stockpile. DLA contracts with recyclers to handle DOD's electronic waste, a process that includes separating out recyclable materials and disposing of what remains. For more than 30 years, DLA has recovered precious metals from excess and surplus property, including electronic waste, for DOD's Precious Metals Recovery Program. The recovered metals are made available to DOD and other federal government agencies. During fiscal year 2016, DLA began to add germanium, a strategic and critical material recovered from night vision devices and other items, to the National Defense Stockpile. In December 2015, DLA changed its electronics disposal process and began selling electronic waste directly to recyclers, instead of paying for the processing and recovery of recyclable materials. Based on GAO's analysis and discussions with DLA officials, this new approach will likely reduce the amount of precious metals that DLA recovers but is expected to streamline the process and increase DLA's revenues.

DOD has assessed potential opportunities to recover certain materials found in its electronic waste, including rare earth elements, but a number of factors may hinder near-term expansion of its recovery efforts. These factors involve a combination of economic conditions, technological challenges, limitations on the types and amounts of materials that can be added to the National Defense Stockpile, the administrative capacity to initiate additional recovery efforts, and tradeoffs between selling electronic waste and recovering materials. Another factor that could hinder expansion of recovery efforts is that DOD does not have information on the material content of items, including the content found in electronic waste. According to DOD, current guidance does not facilitate the collection of this information from suppliers. DOD has begun to take steps toward the development of material declaration standards. A DOD study recommended that DOD coordinate with industry and other federal agencies to develop national-level material declaration standards that suppliers would follow to provide information on the material content of the items. It also recommended that DOD incorporate new material declarations standards into acquisition policies when appropriate. According to an official in the Office of the Secretary of Defense, the department is planning to take actions to develop these material declarations standards. However, the focus of this current effort is identifying materials that present potential health or environmental risks, and DLA therefore does not have reasonable assurance, consistent with federal internal control standards, that the resulting material declaration standards and guidance will also include strategic and critical materials.