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.