



Highlights of [GAO-12-74](#), a report to the Ranking Member, Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, House of Representatives

## Why GAO Did This Study

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) estimates that across the federal government 10,000 computers are discarded each week. Once these used electronics reach the end of their original useful lives, federal agencies have several options for disposing of them. Agencies generally can donate their reusable electronics to schools; give them to a recycler; exchange them with other federal, state, or local agencies; or sell them through selected public auctions, including auctions sponsored by the General Services Administration (GSA). As the world's largest purchaser of information technology, the U.S. government, through its disposition practices, has substantial leverage to influence domestic recycling and disposal practices. GAO was asked to examine (1) key initiatives aimed at improving the management of used federal electronics and (2) improvements resulting from these initiatives and challenges that impede progress, if any. To do this, GAO evaluated federal guidance and policy, as well as guidance and initiatives at five selected agencies. GAO selected agencies based on, among other things, the amount of electronics purchased.

## What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends, among other things, that the White House Council on Environmental Quality, the Office of Management and Budget, and GSA take actions to require consistent tracking and reporting of used electronics and ensure appropriate management of electronics sold at auction. Each agency concurred with GAO's recommendations but, in some instances, proposed alternatives for executing the recommendations.

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## ELECTRONIC WASTE

### Actions Needed to Provide Assurance That Used Federal Electronics Are Disposed of in an Environmentally Responsible Manner

## What GAO Found

Over the past decade, the executive branch has taken steps to improve the management of used federal electronics. Notably, in 2003, EPA helped to pilot the Federal Electronics Challenge (FEC)—a voluntary partnership program that encourages federal facilities and agencies to purchase environmentally friendly electronic products, reduce the impacts of these products during their use, and manage used electronics in an environmentally safe way. EPA also led an effort and provided initial funding to develop third-party certification so that electronics recyclers could show that they are voluntarily adhering to an adopted set of best practices for environmental protection, worker health and safety, and security practices. In 2006, GSA issued its *Personal Property Disposal Guide* to assist agencies in understanding the hierarchy for disposing of excess personal property, including used electronic products: reutilization, donation, sale, and abandonment or destruction. In 2007 and 2009, executive orders were issued that, among other things, established improvement goals and directed agencies to develop and implement improvement plans for the management of used electronics. The Office of Management and Budget, the Council on Environmental Quality, and the Office of the Federal Environmental Executive each play important roles in providing leadership, oversight, and guidance to assist federal agencies with implementing the requirements of these executive orders. To lay the groundwork for enhancing the federal government's management of used electronic products, an interagency task force issued the July 2011 *National Strategy for Electronics Stewardship*. The strategy, which describes goals, action items, and projects, assigns primary responsibility for overseeing or carrying out most of the projects to either EPA or GSA.

Federal agencies have made some progress to improve their management of used electronic products, as measured by greater participation in the FEC and an increase in certified electronics recyclers, but opportunities exist to expand their efforts. For instance, agency participation in the FEC represents only about one-third of the federal workforce. GAO identified challenges with the tracking and reporting on the disposition of federal electronic equipment. For the five agencies GAO reviewed (Departments of Defense, Energy, Education, and Housing and Urban Development and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration), data provided on the disposition of electronic products were inconsistent, which hampered GAO's efforts to accurately assess the extent to which electronic products procured by federal agencies are disposed of in an environmentally sound manner. Challenges associated with clarifying agencies' responsibility for used electronics sold through auctions also remain. Currently, neither the agency nor the auction entities are required to determine whether purchasers follow environmentally sound end-of-life practices. Not having controls over the ultimate disposition of electronics sold through these auctions creates opportunities for buyers to purchase federal electronics and export them to countries with less stringent environmental and health standards. Other challenges that may impede progress toward improving federal agencies' management of used electronics include defining key terms such as "electronic product" and "environmentally sound practices," as each agency uses its own definition of electronic products to report progress in implementing policies for electronics stewardship.