

United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

June 16, 2022

The Honorable Gina Raimondo
Secretary of Commerce
U.S. Department of Commerce
1401 Constitution Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20230

Dear Secretary Raimondo:

We write regarding the economic and environmental harm inflicted by the consumer electronics industry's failure to establish uniform charging accessory standards — a shortcoming that requires consumers to frequently change their charging accessories. This planned obsolescence is expensive and frustrating for consumers, and drives the proliferation of electronic waste (e-waste). In response to these issues, the European Union (EU) just passed important legislation obligating electronics manufacturers to adopt a common charger for mobile devices across the EU.¹ We commend the Department of Commerce for the steps it has already taken to address these issues,² and we urge you to follow the EU's lead by developing a comprehensive strategy to address unnecessary consumer costs, mitigate e-waste, and restore sanity and certainty to the process of purchasing new electronics.

In our increasingly digital society, consumers frequently must pay for new specialized charging equipment and accessories for their different devices. This is not merely an annoyance; it can be a financial burden. The average consumer owns approximately three mobile phone chargers, and around 40 percent of consumers report that, on at least one occasion, they “could not charge their mobile phone because available chargers were incompatible.”³ Innovation should benefit consumers. It should not come at their expense, saddle them with incompatible accessories, and compel them to purchase different charging equipment for each device they own.

¹ Brian Fung, *New EU rule will require all phones and electronics to use a standard charger*, CNN (Jun. 7, 2022), <https://www.cnn.com/2022/06/07/tech/europe-uscb-requirement/index.html>.

² *Environmental Compliance Management Manual*, U.S. Department of Commerce (July 2021), https://www.osec.doc.gov/opog/dmp/resources/EEMM_FINAL_July_2021.pdf; *Implementation Handbook for the Strategic Sustainability Performance Plan*, Department of Commerce (Aug. 2013), https://www.osec.doc.gov/ofeq/documents/oseep/docs%20&%20newsletters/documents/doc_sspp_implementation_handbook_august_2013.pdf; *OSEEP News – Earth Day 2021 Edition*, U.S. Department of Commerce, Office of Sustainable Energy and Environmental Programs (Apr. 22, 2021), <https://www.commerce.gov/sites/default/files/2021-04/OSEEP-Newsletter-EarthDay2021.pdf>.

³ Press Release, European Commission, *Pulling the plug on consumer frustration and e-waste: Commission proposes a common charger for electronic devices* (Sept. 25, 2021), https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_21_4613.

The lack of interoperability standards for charging and other device accessories also results in e-waste and environmental damage. As specialized chargers become obsolete with the introduction of new products, or as consumers change the brand of phone or device that they use, their outdated chargers are usually just thrown away. When electronics are not disposed of properly, e-waste can spread toxins in water, pollute soil, and degrade the air we breathe.⁴ In 2019, humans generated a staggering 53.6 million metric tons of e-waste, and only 17 percent of this waste was recycled.⁵ Chargers that are discarded or never used create more than 11,000 tons of e-waste annually.⁶ This is a global issue, with a lasting impact on our environment and public health.⁷ The U.S. government must respond.

Under the new EU law, by 2024, European consumers will be able to use a single charger to power a variety of devices, including smartphones, tablets, portable speakers, and e-readers.⁸ This policy has the potential to significantly reduce e-waste and help consumers who are tired of having to rummage through junk drawers full of tangled chargers to find a compatible one, or buy a new one. The EU has wisely acted in the public interest by taking on powerful technology companies over this consumer and environmental issue. The United States should do the same.


We urge you to coordinate with offices and agencies across the Department of Commerce to develop a comprehensive plan that will protect both consumers and the environment by addressing the lack of a common U.S. charging standard. We cannot allow the consumer electronics industry to prioritize proprietary and inevitably obsolete charging technology over consumer protection and environmental health.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter. We look forward to your prompt response.

Sincerely,



Edward J. Markey
United States Senator



Elizabeth Warren
United States Senator

⁴ Lucy McAllister, *The Human and Environmental Effects of E-Waste*, PRB (Apr. 4, 2013), <https://www.prb.org/resources/the-human-and-environmental-effects-of-e-waste/#:~:text=For%20example%2C%20primary%20and%20secondary,to%20pulmonary%20and%20cardiovascular%20disease.>

⁵ Vanessa Forti et al., *The Global E-waste Monitor 2020: Quantities flows and circular economy potential*, United Nations University/United Nations Institute for Training and Research, International Telecommunication Union, and International Solid Waste Association (July 2, 2020), https://ewastemonitor.info/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/GEM_2020_def_july1_low.pdf.

⁶ Press Release, European Commission, Pulling the plug on consumer frustration and e-waste: Commission proposes a common charger for electronic devices (Sept. 25, 2021), https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_21_4613.

⁷ Press Release, World Health Organization, Soaring e-waste affects the health of millions of children, WHO warns (Jun. 15, 2021), <https://www.who.int/news/item/15-06-2021-soaring-e-waste-affects-the-health-of-millions-of-children-who-warns>.

⁸ *Id.*

The Honorable Gina Raimondo
June 16, 2022
Page 3

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Bern Sanders". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Bernard Sanders
United States Senator