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E-Waste Being Wasted

Posted on 11. Mar, 2010 by [Karen](#) in [green living](#)



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According to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), three fourths of Americans have old computers and televisions stored in their garages or closets. Not surprising since these electronics are considered hazardous waste called ‘e-waste’ due to heavy metal content like lead, mercury, cadmium—and fire retardants and polluting PVC plastic shells. In 2007 alone, 68 million computers and 99 million televisions became obsolete. Sadly, only 18 percent of e-waste was recycled—the other 1.84 million pounds was disposed of primarily in landfills and incinerators.

While recycling 1.84 million tons of e-waste sounds better for the environment than doing nothing, a 2007 EPA report indicates an estimated 61 percent (107,500 tons) of CRT monitors and TVs collected were exported for remanufacture or refurbishment—most to third world countries who have the labor pools to disassemble these items for their steel, copper, lead, silver, gold, and glass. A cell phone, for example, is 19 percent copper and eight percent iron. Countries like China, Africa, India, and Pakistan can process e-waste for ten times less—even after shipping costs from the United States. The fact that their countries have inadequate laws to protect their workers finds children burning piles of wiring for the copper in Africa, and workers in China & Pakistan heating motherboards over small stoves to melt the solder welds and recover wanted materials. What is not wanted is simply dumped. This is not an acceptable way for Americans to dispose of their hazardous waste.

So while the Senate and House are only now considering funding of research studies for solutions, what can a responsible family do with increasing collection of unwanted electronic products that will not create more problems for the environment later? One answer is to donate your items to a company committed to workplace and environmental safety with none of the e-waste exported and no environmentally sensitive materials being sent to a landfill. If they agree to third-party oversight of their processes, all the better.

In 2004, Dell and Goodwill Industries started the Reconnect program in Austin, Texas. They have since kept 96 million pounds of e-waste out of landfills and from being exported. With more than 1,900 stores nationwide, dropping your e-waste off at a Goodwill Store is certainly convenient. Since its inception, the Reconnect program has created more than 250 green jobs with Goodwill employees managing responsible computer disassembly and disposal. As the perfect model for reduce-reuse-recycle, Goodwill stores use monies earned from recycling e-waste to provide job training, employment placement services and other community based programs for people with disabilities, lack of education, or job experience, and to those who face employment challenges.

On April 17, EcoAvenues, a free event on the Estrella Mountain Community College campus that showcases the environmentally friendly products, services, education and activities from businesses and organizations throughout the Phoenix metropolitan area, will have a Goodwill truck for e-waste collection from 8am to 1pm. Clear out your closets and garage—and get information on how to live a more sustainable lifestyle. Goodwill Industries will collect all your e-waste and accept regular donations that day.

By Susan Staal

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