



What To Do With Electronic Waste

BY JEAN MACKAY, DIRECTOR OF EDUCATIONAL SERVICES



Give your old computer and other electronics a new life by donating or recycling them.

You've heard of e-mail, e-commerce, and e-Bay. Now our computer-oriented culture has created another "e" for our lexicon: *e-waste*. Electronic or electrical products—ranging from computers, televisions, and stereo equipment to small appliances, such as irons and cell phones—become known as "e-waste" when they are disposed of or become obsolete.

E-waste is a fast-growing part of our waste stream, now making up approximately 1 percent of municipal solid waste. That might not sound like much, until you consider a few additional facts:

- It is estimated that by 2005, 130 million cell phones will be discarded annually, amounting to 65,000 tons of waste a year (New York Times, Oct. 8, 2002).
- Over 20 million personal computers became obsolete in 1998 alone; only 13 percent were reused or recycled (U.S. EPA).
- Circuit boards, batteries, and CRT (color cathode ray tubes) monitors contain hazardous materials, such as lead, mercury, and chromium. Each television and CRT monitor contains four pounds of lead, on average (U.S. EPA).

When electronics are discarded with regular household or workplace garbage, the toxics contained in them end up in your municipal landfill or incinerator, posing environmental and health threats. For instance, mercury from electronics has been cited as the leading source of mercury in municipal waste.

Fortunately, there are alternatives to just tossing a computer, VCR, DVD player, or other electronics in the trash. Here's what to do:

Evaluate- Does the equipment still function well? If so, donate it. If not, recycle it.

Donate computers and working electronics to a local charity or school. Not only will you help someone else, you'll extend the lives of your electronics and keep them out of the waste stream for a longer time.

Recycle- Electronics are made with valuable materials, such as steel, glass, and plastic, that can be recovered and reused. If your municipality has a recycling center, inquire about computer and electronic collections. Other options include electronic recycling companies, repair shops, or even a local electronics retailer, which may collect used products for recycling.

e-Source

Visit our online information center for fact sheets on a variety of environmental topics:

www.auduboninternational.org/e-source

Audubon International
46 Rarick Road
Selkirk, NY 12158
(518) 767-9051

Unfortunately, much of our recycled electronic equipment ends up in dumps in the Third World. There, in the absence of environmental or worker safety regulations, low wage laborers pick through hazardous materials to scavenge for precious metals. Toxic substances readily contaminate soil and water.

According to a 2002 report, *Exporting Harm: The High-Tech Trashing of Asia* (Basel Action Network and Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition, 2002), as much as 50% to 80% of United State e-waste collected for recycling gets shipped out of the country. When you recycle, inquire about whether the recycler or reseller has taken steps to ensure that parts are not transferred to someone who might dump them overseas.

Dispose of with Hazardous Wastes- When your equipment is no longer functional and recycling is not an option, dispose of it with other hazardous wastes.

Buy Green- Some electronic products are designed with environmental attributes, such as recycled content, energy efficiency, fewer toxics, and minimal packaging. Consumer demand for such products helps drive manufacturers to design greener electronics.

Where can I take my e-waste?

Contact the following organizations for information on donating, recycling, and buying green electronics:

Donations

- Goodwill Industries, www.goodwill.org
- Students Recycling Used Technology (StRut), www.strut.org, or call (503)251- 3771.
- Learning and Information Networking for Community via Technology (LINCT), www.linct.org
- Materials Exchanges, www.epa.gov/jtr/comm/exchange.htm
- Reuse Development Organization (ReDo), www.redo.org
- Southern Materials Waste Information Exchange (SWIX), www.ElectronicXchange.org

Recycling

- EIA Consumer Education Initiative (CEI), www.eiae.org; provides help for finding environmentally responsible options for donating and recycling electronics.
- International Association of Electronics Recyclers (IAER), www.iaer.org/search; offers an online directory of electronics recyclers.
- U.S. EPA's Product Stewardship Program, www.epa.gov/epr
- U.S. EPA Office of Solid Waste Emergency Response, http://www.epa.gov/epaoswer/osw/elec_fs.pdf

Buying Green

- National Recycling Coalition, www.nrc-recycle.org/Programs/electronics/index.htm.
- Northwest Product Stewardship Council, www.govlink.org/nwpsc.

(source: U.S. EPA)