

Why recycling e-waste is vital

04/09/2008

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EVERYONE has them. They are stored in offices, attics, cellars and closets - electronic items that are obsolete or are no longer needed.

Most of us are likely to have at least one item. Your place of work is likely to have unwanted electronic junk because of the common misconception that used electronics have substantial residual value. The older the equipment, the less value it has.

So what should you do with those old, unwanted electronics?

Despite the fact that it is illegal in California to throw a television or computer monitor in the trash, many individuals and businesses still do so. If the unwanted equipment is no longer usable as a donation to schools or charity, the first impulse is often to find a place to dump it. Therein lies the tragedy of e-waste - an environmental and human rights issue that has grown at an alarming rate over the past several years.

Up to 80 percent of the electronic waste that should be responsibly recycled is quietly exported to countries where products such as computers, radios and television sets are dismantled in a crude fashion that causes severe environmental and public health risks. This means big business not only for the United States but recipient countries in Africa and India, Pakistan and, especially, China - where environmental restrictions are lax and the economies poor.

Despite efforts to curtail this, the electronic waste trade runs rampant, affecting child and adult laborers as

they dismantle computers, television sets and radios, likely unaware of the hazardous toxins they are handling.

Television and computer monitors use cathode ray tubes, which have a significant amount of lead.

Printed circuit boards contain plastic and copper and most have small amounts of chromium, lead solder, nickel and zinc.

Batteries contain nickel, cadmium and other heavy metals. Relays and switches in electronics may also contain mercury.

Direct contact with all of these metals has been proven to result in skin and bone diseases, respiratory illnesses and damage to the nervous system. Under the best recycling conditions,

this is frightening. Just think about the risk when performed in a country with little or no environmental guidelines and regulations.

For these reasons, Marin County works with Electronic Recyclers International, which has emerged as the No. 1 recycler of e-waste in California. ERI tracks all e-waste entering its facilities through a system capable of locating e-waste at all stages, from receiving reports to reconciliation reports to downstream vendors. This assures that all e-waste received by ERI is 100 percent recycled and traceable. This "cradle to grave" tracking method ensures that e-waste does not end up in the hands of other companies, local landfills and is not illegally exported to other nations.

In our first two e-waste weekends, the county collected more than 285,000 pounds of e-waste. Through Marin County's relationship with EIR, we know that every ounce of recycled materials was handled in a conscientious and lawful manner.

Recycling electronic waste is just the first step. Making sure that it is recycled responsibly completes the circle.

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WEEKEND EVENT

Marin County, in partnership with Electronic Recyclers International, the Marin Conservation Corps, Independent Journal and Community Development Agency Sustainability Team, will host the third e-waste drive weekend, from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. April 12 and 13, at the Marin County Fairgrounds, off Avenue of the Flags in San Rafael. Marin Conservation Corps crew members will be on hand to help unload bulky equipment. ERI will issue certificates of destruction to everyone who disposes of their electronic waste. For information, visit www.marinsustainability.org