

Tailing E-waste

Following the Orange Dot up the I-5

August 1, 2010

by Lisa Conti



When I started having problems opening and closing my two kitchen drawers designated for batteries, chargers, and miscellaneous electronics items, I knew it was time to tackle the black nest. Not only were the drawers physically impeded by their dark contents but the weight alone made pulling each one open a two-handed ordeal. It's a task that I've been procrastinating on for a few years now.

So one gorgeous sunny afternoon, I moved the trashcan over, placed a paper bag nearby, set the

battery tester on the counter, and got to it.

The digital camera that was less expensive to replace than repair, a universal (hardly) adapter, and headphones with only one functioning ear bud were all tossed into the bag. Many items more obsolete than broken found themselves among the refuse.

One was an archaic, yet mostly functional, cell phone. Even though the phone was antiquated, my gears were turning. It could be used for one last thing. With some juggling of SIM (subscriber identity module) cards, battery charging, and a quick click on my phone provider's Web site, I had a new tracking device. So long as it was on and within proximity of a tower, I could hit a button on my computer and watch an orange dot appear atop the backdrop of a map. While I contemplated sewing the thing into my son's jacket, I decided to continue with my electronic cleansing plan and tossed it into the bag.

For residents, disposal of household electronics is free. In Goleta, there are several [drop-off locations](#). At the largest site, the [South Coast Recycling and Transfer Station](#) on Calle Real, I found towers of shrink-wrapped televisions alongside pillars of computers. These sparkling, stretched plastic columns atop wooden pallets waited for a forklift.

I deposited my bag into a rusty metal bin labeled E-Waste and then, with the help of supervisor Tom Wackerman, I was able to see the overhead cardboard box that would take my phone away. The phone ended up at the bottom; I heard it clink and clank all the way down.

Back at my computer, I was able to see the orange dot hovering over County Dump Road. It stayed there for the night and through the next morning. It was there at lunch and into the afternoon. Then at 4 p.m. the signal altogether vanished.

Four hours later, on a Thursday night, it reappeared in a small town in the Central Valley. In the morning it was on the move, the orange dots traveling along the I-5.

In years past, electronic devices and peripherals could be tossed directly into the landfill. Because hazardous materials such as lead and mercury can leach out of equipment into the environment, disposing of electronics in a place where toxic substances can reach the groundwater is not only perilous, since 2006, it's illegal.

Given that valuable metals such as gold and silver are also embedded in the amalgam of discards, the industry is fraught with ulterior motives and negligent procedures that pose both environmental and public health risks. "We worked hard to find a responsible and environmentally safe recycler," Wackerman told me.

The amount of discarded electronic equipment that passes through the transfer station is increasing. Currently 25,000 to 30,000 pounds of electronics—more than enough to fill a semi to the max—is carted away every two weeks. That's double last year's number. Around the holidays, a truck a week makes the trip up the I-5.

By Friday afternoon, the truck that took my cell phone arrived at its Fresno destination, [Electronic Recyclers International, Inc. \(ERI\)](#). I zoomed in on the satellite image, an industrial area with box trucks that looked like laid out dominoes. At ERI, equipment is dismantled within 24 to 48 hours of arrival. It takes seconds for a computer to get crushed. What isn't smashed by machine is dismantled by hand. Metals and plastics are then separated, resold, and put into new products.

The last orange signal recorded was Saturday morning. With 250 employees dedicated to processing 10 million pounds per month, the turnaround time may have beat the phone's battery life. Which says something considering the thing never did hold a charge for very long.

By the way, cell phones can be given back to the retailer or donated for reuse. And whichever route you choose, removal of the SIM card and termination of service are also recommended. It's always best to clear stored information from electronic equipment before recycling.

Original URL: <http://www.independent.com/news/2010/aug/01/tailing-e-waste/>