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Not in My Backyard: Stopping Illegal Export of Junked Televisions and Computers

A new standard would certify that old cell phones, iPods and other toxic-laden electronics are recycled responsibly, but needs government backup

By David Biello

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) last week fined electronics recycler Jet Ocean Technology of Chino, Calif., just over \$10,000 for illegally exporting [cathode-ray tubes](#) from old television sets to China. Jet Ocean is only the second electronics recycler to be penalized for shipping and deliberately mislabeling the tubes, which contain the brain-damaging metal lead. It falsely labeled the cargo as "mixed metal scrap" when it shipped it out—and as "[scrap metal](#)" when China (after being warned by Greenpeace of the true contents) refused to accept delivery and returned it.

An investigation by the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) earlier this year found that the EPA had "no plans and no timetable for developing the basic components of an enforcement strategy" to ensure [proper disposal of harmful e-waste](#), which includes recycling components and safely handling and disposing of toxic materials, including lead, mercury and cadmium, despite having launched new e-waste guidelines in 2007 called "Responsible Recycling," or R2.

But the EPA's standard does nothing to prevent [e-waste export](#) or keep it out of landfills, nor does it offer any tracking of toxic components to ensure proper disposal. As it stands, the U.S. produces three million metric tons of the estimated 50 million metric tons of electronics garbage produced worldwide annually, according to EPA.

Worried about a "tsunami" of e-waste when new TV standards take effect on February 17, e-waste public interest groups the Basel Action Network (BAN) and the Electronics Take Back Coalition have launched a new program that will independently audit and certify electronics recyclers. The groups will hire independent consultant auditors to evaluate each company's handling of e-waste, including full tracking of all electronics and their components until final disposal, and those who achieve so-called [e-Steward](#) certification will pay licensing fees to the organizations to run the program.

"Corporations that want to do the right thing—almost all of them—lack the means and auditing expertise even if they had the financial resources to ensure their recycling vendors are doing what they are supposed to be doing," says Robert Houghton, president of [Redemtech](#), an electronics recycler and a founding member of the new program. "Many companies in our industry are fraudulent. They claim to recycle but then ship some or all of the electronics they collect to developing countries."

Once there, laborers break and cook old electronic goods to free the materials they contain, ranging from gold to plastics, and, in the process, expose themselves to toxic lead, mercury, cadmium and other products. In fact, the Blacksmith Institute, an environmental health group based in New York City, named lead-acid battery recycling as one of the [worst environmental problems](#) in the world in October.

[Recycling lead-containing electronics](#)—whether old car batteries or cathode-ray tubes—has led to children in the vicinity of such operations, from China to Kenya, with lead levels as much as 10 times higher than the 10 micrograms per deciliter deemed safe by the World Health Organization. Each 10-microgram-per-deciliter rise in lead lowers intelligence levels by four to seven points on IQ tests, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

At the same time, it takes 1.8 tons (1,630 kilograms) of raw materials and roughly 529 pounds (240 kilograms) of coal or other fossil fuels to manufacture every personal computer—81 percent of the energy an average unit will use in its lifetime, according to a study from United Nations University in Tokyo. By extending product life, such energy expenditure—as well as recycling issues—could be restrained.

Ultimately, it is a question of cost, as evidenced in Denver, Colo., where e-Steward founding member [Guaranteed Recycling Xperts](#) (GRX) bid for the city's e-waste business but lost out to [Executive Recycling](#), a company that charged the city nothing to haul the e-trash away, but ultimately was found to be [shipping some of it to China](#). "We said [to the city of Denver] 'it's possible to provide a no-cost solution and it's also possible to provide responsible recycling. It is not possible to do both,'" GRX CEO Mike Wright says. "The city of Denver decided to go with the zero-cost option."

With millions of TVs containing [cathode-ray tubes](#) expected to be junked in February (due to the switch over to digital television signals), responsible recyclers will no doubt be swamped. "It is a cost to handle it responsibly, [the tubes] have no value," says Sarah Westervelt, e-Stewards project coordinator at BAN. "We expect a tsunami of CRTs going offshore for this reason."

Unscrupulous electronics recyclers have found it easy to circumvent EPA and other national government rules on [e-waste export](#) by simply labeling such shipments as electronics for reuse in developing countries. But once there, the majority of such shipments are sold for scrap, says Jim Puckett, executive director of BAN. Or, such companies can simply crush the tubes prior to export to avoid falling under the EPA's R2 guidelines. "Then it falls outside the rules," he adds. "It's extremely easy to circumvent this rule."

"These are the sweat shops of the new millennium," says Neil-Peterson Michaud, CEO of [Cascade Asset Management](#), another founding e-Steward company. "It really disgusts me when you see other people in the industry who are either blatantly disregarding the negative impacts or just too naive to ask where and what is the ultimate fate of their e-scrap."