

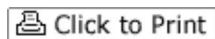


**HEAT SURGE**  
30 DAY SATISFACTION GUARANTEE

HELP YOUR HEAT BILLS  
HIT ROCK BOTTOM &  
NEVER BE COLD AGAIN



Powered by Clickability



[SAVE THIS](#) | [EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)

## Don't recycle 'e-waste' with haste, activists warn

By G. Jeffrey MacDonald, Special for USA TODAY

Consumers saddled with old cellphones, TVs and computers are flocking to electronics recycling events, which have sprung up in more than 1,000 communities over the past four years.

But don't be fooled, activists warn. Items collected at free events are sometimes destined for salvage yards in developing nations, where toxins spill into the water, the air and the lungs of laborers paid a few dollars per day to extract materials.

"If nobody is paying (the collectors) to take this stuff, especially if they're getting a lot of televisions, then they are very likely exporting because that's how they make the economics work," says Barbara Kyle, national coordinator of the Electronics TakeBack Coalition, a San Francisco-based advocacy group.

"E-waste," or electronics trash, is piling up faster than ever, according to the Environmental Protection Agency. Americans discarded 47 million computers in 2005, up from 20 million in 1998. Factor in other forms of electronics, and the nation now dumps between 300 million and 400 million electronic items per year, according to estimates from the EPA and the TakeBack Coalition.

E-waste disposal rates are poised to accelerate in the run-up to a nationwide switch to digital television signals in February. Less than 20% of all electronic waste is recycled, according to the EPA. The rest ends up in landfills.

Still, recycling rates are rising. Free drop-off events, designed primarily to keep lead, mercury, barium and other e-waste toxins out of local landfills, have attracted overflow crowds in the past year. Last fall, organizers at a Bloomington, Minn., event planned to fill 34 trailers but ended up filling 85.

In March, piles of electronics lay in a Seattle Pacific University parking lot for days as organizers struggled to handle the unexpectedly large volume. In April, a Washington, D.C., event snarled traffic for hours as some 4,000 people lined up to drop off items.

When recyclers cart away e-waste, what happens next can vary widely, according to Bruce Parker, president of the National Solid Waste Management Association (NSWMA), a trade association that includes electronics recyclers. Some separate glass, metal and plastics, and then make sure that most reusable materials find their way into new products. Others bring their loads to brokers, who ship contents overseas to salvagers, who pay to mine mountainous piles for precious metals and other valuables.

This tapestry of approaches is possible because recyclers don't have to be certified. U.S. law (unlike Europe's) permits the export of electronic waste to developing nations.

Meanwhile, salvage yards, once concentrated primarily in Guiyu, China, are proliferating. Last month, Consumers International, a London-based advocacy group, reported that Ghana and Nigeria are now receiving hundreds of tons of e-waste from the developed world each month. According to the Basel Action Network, a Seattle-based non-profit, much of the e-waste generated in the USA also ends up in Pakistan and India, where children often do the sorting and toxic circuit boards are burned in residential neighborhoods.

Advertisement



“ \$2 ”  
X  
**50,000**  
humans!

to save dance from  
the economic crisis.

Be a part of  
the movement! >>

The challenge for consumers who use free drop-off events is to know when to be concerned and when to feel at ease about their gadgetry's final resting place.

"Sometimes these events are organized as fundraisers or as local non-profit events, which is great, but people really should ask questions about where the material is going," says Elizabeth Grossman, author of *High Tech Trash: Digital Devices, Hidden Toxics and Human Health* (Island Press, 2006).

Being responsible about e-waste disposal isn't as simple as making sure a recycler does no exporting whatsoever, according to Kim Holmes, executive editor of *E-Scrap News*, a trade magazine for electronics recyclers.

For instance, recovering certain types of plastics is too labor-intensive to be practical in the USA, where labor rates are substantially higher than in China. "If we didn't have that market in China, all that (plastic) would end up in landfills," Holmes says.

What's more, both the EPA and NSWMA challenge activists' claims that e-waste in landfills poses risks to groundwater. "We believe the disposal of electronics, including those that qualify as household hazardous waste, in municipal solid waste landfills is protective of human health and the environment if that disposal occurs in modern, properly managed municipal solid waste landfills," says EPA spokeswoman Roxanne Smith.

The TakeBack Coalition's Kyle counters that not all landfills are modern and properly managed. Either way, landfill diversion programs are getting encouragement. Ten states and New York City have taken steps to ban certain categories of e-waste from landfills.

The NSWMA touts domestic recycling of e-waste as an efficient use of resources. And consumers find they have a growing number of free, eco-friendly disposal options.

For instance, Best Buy last month launched a pilot recycling program in three metropolitan areas. Dell and Sony take back their computers and televisions free of charge. When manufacturers and retailers are involved in an event, Grossman says, recycling is usually done to high standards because they need to protect their brands.


When manufacturers aren't sponsoring an event, Holmes recommends asking organizers whether their recycler uses "separated waste streams" and has secured any voluntary certifications.

The EPA is developing a set of voluntary certification standards for electronics recyclers. In the meantime, consumers seeking peace of mind may need to keep doing their homework.

---

**Find this article at:**

[http://www.usatoday.com/tech/products/environment/2008-07-06-ewaste-recycling\\_N.htm?POE=click-refer](http://www.usatoday.com/tech/products/environment/2008-07-06-ewaste-recycling_N.htm?POE=click-refer)

 [Click to Print](#)

[SAVE THIS](#) | [EMAIL THIS](#) | [Close](#)

Check the box to include the list of links referenced in the article.

Copyright 2008 USA TODAY, a division of Gannett Co. Inc.