

The Dangers of Exporting E-waste

by Ken Manchen, Newark & Premier Farnell



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As readers of ECN well know, Americans are purchasing new and improved electronic products faster than ever—and thereby creating a record amount of electronic waste. What you may not know is that 50% of the e-waste generated in the European Union and North America is now exported to developing countries such as India, China and Africa. The consequences of choosing this far cheaper alternative to responsible recycling is alarming, as was portrayed in a recent 60 Minutes segment.

In India, China and Africa, it is a common practice for adults and children to make money “backyard recycling” scrap electronic products. Unprotected workers heat the products over open fires to remove reusable components. They soak what remains in acid baths to extract reclaimable metals. In the process, these “backyard recyclers” are exposed to a variety of toxic substances. Dr. Thuppil Venkatesh, advisor to the National Referral Centre for Lead Poisoning in India (NRCLPI), reports that 53% of the children under age 12 in Bangalore have elevated lead levels in their blood, which is resulting in brain damage and is restricting their ability to learn.

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The majority of western countries have enacted rules to prevent the improper disposal of e-waste. There is even an international treaty (the Basel Convention) that bans trans-border shipments. Neither the US nor Canada has yet endorsed this agreement.

There is some good news on the homefront. Twelve states and five provinces have recognized the seriousness of the problem and decided not to wait for the federal government to act. They have gone ahead and enacted laws requiring the proper disposal of end-of-life electronic products. In addition, responsible manufacturers like Sony, Samsung and Nokia have introduced their own product take-back schemes to ensure proper end-of-life recycling of the products they sell.

While all this is gratifying to see, we still need effective, enforceable federal e-waste rules in both the US and Canada. Such rules are the only way to ensure our e-waste stops being sent to developing countries where it is being crudely handled in a manner that we would never allow here.

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