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Are Old PCs Poisoning Us?

Toxic gear is piling up in landfills, but recycling could help

By Norm Alster in Boston with William Echikson in Brussels

After The Morning News in Florence, S.C., outfitted staffers with new computers, managers tried to find takers for the old gear. Not expecting much for their old computers, they thought it would be a breeze to unload the nearly three tons of equipment. But after eight months of trying to sell, donate, or recycle the discards, Assistant Systems Manager Karen Robertson-Kidd found just one viable destination: "They ended up in a landfill. Nobody wanted them."

Increasingly, U.S. landfill and incinerator facilities are the last stop for electronic waste. But computers, cell phones, TVs, and other electronic equipment are laden with toxins that can leach into groundwater or produce dioxins and other carcinogens when burned. Ted Smith, executive director of the nonprofit Silicon Valley Toxic Coalition, warns that, other than pesticides, "I can't think of anything in the household that would present more of a problem than a computer."

The problem is finally getting official notice. After seven years of discussion, the European Commission is expected to propose new legislation on June 8 that will require manufacturers to collect, recycle, and dispose of their electrical and electronic products at the end of their life cycles. The EC is also expected to propose a timetable for the phaseout of some of the most toxic materials used in electronic products, such as lead, mercury, cadmium, and some types of flame-retardants.

The EC's proposals could cost as much as \$18 billion to \$27 billion to implement, estimates the European industry group Orgalile. The electronics industry is especially worried about the phaseout provision. Intense lobbying has been directed at eliminating, or at least extending, any phaseout timetable on the grounds that there are just no alternative materials.

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OBSOLESCENCE. Whatever actions are taken in Europe could well influence the course of events in the U.S. IBM, for example, is one of several computer manufacturers that have signaled willingness to accept end-of-life responsibility for their products in Europe. An internal IBM task force is also studying the feasibility of taking back its own PCs -- albeit at consumer expense -- in the U.S. The task force hopes to identify "the most economical way to dispose of computers in an environmentally sound way," says Diana Bendz, director of environmentally conscious products at IBM in Somers, N.Y.

All this may come as a surprise to those who thought the Information Age would spawn a cleaner environment. Computers, cell phones, televisions, and other electronic gear are chock-full of toxins. Already, the five pounds or more of lead in computer screens and TVs represents 40% of all the lead in U.S. landfill. Each year, a billion pounds of plastics, about one-quarter of them polyvinyl chloride that produce cancer-producing dioxin when burned, are dumped with electronic scrap.

The problem is about to get much worse. Computer replacement cycles are contracting as new models are introduced faster and faster. A study by the National Safety Council predicts that by 2007 there will be almost 500 million obsolete computers in the U.S. In four years, estimates Carnegie Mellon University, there will be 70 million computers in landfills.

The EU is not the only government entity to try tackling this looming mess. The Netherlands, Sweden, and Norway have already passed laws making manufacturers responsible for the end-of-life recycling of their own goods, while in the U.S., there have been some scattered local initiatives. Hennepin County, Minn., which includes Minneapolis-St. Paul, last year recovered more than 50,000 computers from residents. Massachusetts recently banned the disposal of cathode-ray tubes (CRTs) in landfills, and New Jersey, North Carolina, and other states are now evaluating options for electronic-product waste.

It is ironic that in an industry where growth is so widely tracked, the most vigorous growth sector of all is the obsolete computer. As recently as 1994, buyers held on to their computers from four to six years, according to the National Safety Council. But by 2004, the council estimates

that the average life of a computer will be just two years, and few are reused. In 1998, for every PC recycled, more than 16 new ones were sold, according to the National Safety Council.

The remaining machines pose hazards whether they are dumped or incinerated. "We've learned that when you put these kinds of materials into landfill, they eventually leach into the groundwater," says Smith of the Silicon Valley Toxic Coalition. Incineration releases dioxins into the atmosphere, along with mercury and cadmium, according to the European Union.

It's not minuscule amounts of toxins, either. The Environmental Protection Agency says lead can make up as much as 25% of the weight of monitors weighing anywhere from 15 to 90 pounds. The EPA already considers CRTs hazardous waste, says David Jones, a director in the agency's San Francisco office. However, a "residential" exemption allows users who produce less than 220 pounds of CRT waste monthly to dump them in the trash -- thus protecting any business that throws out as many as three or four machines per month.

The Europe-wide proposed directive, however, would be much tougher. Particularly worrisome to manufacturers is the controversial mandate that manufacturers must phase out many toxic elements used in production. "It includes a total redesign of the manufacturing process. You have to rebuild your factory to get rid of lead," says Val Herman, director of government affairs for International Computers Ltd.

DELAYING TACTICS. Opposition has already pushed back the deadline for phasing out the use of toxins from 2004 to 2008, and Europe's Association of Household Appliance Manufacturers recently petitioned for further postponement to 2010. Their claim: "For many applications, alternatives to lead, mercury, cadmium, chromium," and certain flame-retardants "are not currently available."

Some major manufacturers do support other elements of the European proposal, however. IBM, Intel, Hewlett-Packard, and five other manufacturers have declared their willingness to accept financial responsibility for end-of-life recycling. And many manufacturers see the need for a Continent-wide regulation. "We welcome a harmonized solution in Europe.

We can't afford to have 15 different systems," says Luigi Meli of the Appliance Manufacturers group.

In Europe and the U.S., the chief issue is with computers sold to individuals and small business, since large computer makers typically have take-back programs for their corporate customers. Compaq Computer Corp., for example, takes back 200,000 computers a year in North America. IBM's Bendz emphasizes that no conclusions have yet been reached about a consumer take-back program, but says that IBM may be able to break even on a program that would require U.S. consumers to pay \$25 on disposal.

Environmentalists argue that the costs of detoxifying computers should be included in the purchase price. One way or another, it appears that computer makers -- and users -- around the world will soon have to start cleaning up after themselves.

[Business Week](#) June 12, 2000

COMMENT: The moral here is that I believe we should be responsible citizens and dispose of our old PCs in the proper way. It does not make sense to further pollute the world and increase everyone else's toxic exposures. If you contact your village hall they may have sites that will recycle the PCs. In my local community of Schaumburg, IL, Motorola has its world headquarters here and has provided that recycling service for our community. However, most individuals are unaware of it.

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