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Face up to tech waste

America should work to ban the global export of electronic debris

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By TOBY MILLER

The Environmental Protection Agency estimates that U.S. residents own approximately 3 billion electronic devices. The Consumer Electronics Association says we spent $145 billion on them last year. That's a 13 percent increase from 2005. The association celebrates what it calls a "consumer love affair with technology."

We are all supposed to applaud the uptake of this new technology. After all, doesn't it represent clean and green business -- a post-manufacturing utopia for workers, consumers and residents, where the byproducts are electronic code rather than smoke?

Toxic Trash

Story continues below

AP photo

The U.S. practice of shipping dangerous electronic waste to poor countries is just another example of the federal government's failure to take a serious or leading role in protecting the environment.

But electronic waste (e-waste) is the fastest growing part of municipal cleanups in developed countries. Pollution from today's electronic media includes such highly toxic contaminants as trichloroethylene (a probable carcinogen that can enter groundwater, pass into soil, then return to waterways) and heavy-metal sources such as lead, zinc, copper, cobalt, mercury and cadmium. About 70 percent of heavy metals in the world's landfills are e-waste.

More than 80 percent of electronic scrap is being exported to the poorest quarters of the world. A hundred thousand PCs entered the port of Lagos, Nigeria, each month in 2006 -- 75,000 of them unusable other than as scrap. California alone shipped about 20 million pounds of e-waste last year to Malaysia, Brazil, South Korea, China, Mexico, Vietnam and India.

Across the United States, perhaps 60 million PCs and their detritus are seeping through our own landfills or being burned in incinerators, while the transition to exclusively digital broadcasting in 2009 will see an e-waste hurricane of 270 million outdated analog TVs hitting landfills across the nation and the world.

E-waste salvage yards have generated serious concerns regarding worker health and safety as plastics and wires are burned and circuit boards are leached with acid or grilled. They are then dumped into streams after first being stripped of valuable items such as nickel or copper.

Young Chinese, Nigerian and Indian girls do a lot of electronic recycling, picking away without protection at discarded televisions and computers from developed countries. Their hope is to find precious metals, leaving the remains in landfills.

The city of Guiyu, China's principal dump, boasts more than 5,000 electronic recycling businesses. Eighty-two percent of the city's children younger than age 6 have lead poisoning.

Tragically, the United States has failed to ratify the key international accord on this matter, the Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and their Disposal, or its subsequent updates. The Basel agreements seek to prevent the export of e-waste.

We are all too used to the federal government failing to take a serious role on the environment, let alone a leading one. But we are also used to vibrant environmental critiques and innovations deriving from our civil society and local government.

Be Accountable

Let's honor the latter tradition and pressure the federal government to join other developed economies in working to outlaw the international export of e-waste, and to require corporations to act more responsibly at home and abroad by adopting the principle that they are responsible for the post-consumption fate of technology.

In the meantime, keep buying those 3 billion electronic gadgets. But when that sleek new flat-screen TV arrives in your living room, you might ask yourself, where did your old fat-screen TV end up?

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