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Recycling efforts no match for surging e-waste stream

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This holiday season Americans gave each other more electronic gifts -- iPods, cell phones, computers, televisions, video game systems and various other gadgets -- than ever before.

As the holiday decorations come down, they are now faced with the inevitable question: What to do with the old stuff?

The rapidly falling price of electronics means the amount of electronic waste is rising at what environmentalists say is an alarming rate. Computers are getting cheaper and cheaper, tempting users to dump their old models. People are swapping their cell phones, Blackberrys and iPods for newer models every year or two. Flat-screen televisions are replacing old tubes by the millions.

Manufacturers and municipalities have been slowly setting up recycling programs. But statistics show the vast majority of old televisions, computers and cell phones -- and the dangerous lead, mercury and other toxic materials inside them -- are sitting in basements and closets or ending up in landfills.

"It's a spiraling problem," said Barbara Kyle, national coordinator of the Computer Take Back Campaign. "E-waste is the fastest growing waste stream in the U.S. ... This is a wave that continues to break and it's just gaining momentum."

Part of the problem is consumers don't know what to do with their old machines. If you have a pile of old keyboards, monitors and a CPU or two gathering dust in your basement, you are not alone. Federal government researchers estimate 75 percent of all computers ever sold in the United States are still sitting somewhere, waiting to be thrown out.

Under pressure from environmental groups, Dell, Apple and Hewlett-Packard have recently set up computer recycling programs that allow users to send their old computers and components back to the manufacturer to be recycled for free or a small fee.

Many municipal and county governments also have added monthly or annual e-waste collection days to their recycling programs. But Kyle, whose California-based Computer Take Back Campaign is seeking to raise awareness, says state governments need to pass laws requiring every old computer and obsolete electronic device to be recycled.

"It's not happening adequately on its own," Kyle said. "In states like New Jersey, horrifically, it's still going into landfills."

Though there are strict federal and state regulations requiring businesses to recycle their old computers and electronics, New Jersey state law still allows residents to put computers, televisions and other electronics out with the regular trash, said Guy Watson, chief of the bureau of recycling and planning at the state Department of Environmental Protection.

STARTING SMALL

Local and county recycling efforts have been making a small, but noticeable, difference. In 2005, 1.6 million tons of computer and electronic waste was recycled in New Jersey, Watson said. That made up less than 1 percent of all the materials recycled in the state.

Though environmentalists dream of a day when residents can set a "gray container" with electronic waste beside their blue recycling buckets at the curb for pickup, local officials say they have not figured out a way to make mass electronic recycling economically feasible.

In some states, including California, consumers pay a few dollars every time they buy a computer to fund a state recycling program. Other states have passed legislation requiring electronics manufacturers to cover some of the cost of recycling.

New Jersey lawmakers debated similar legislation last year that would require computer manufacturers to assume some of the cost of recycling. A separate proposal would have required consumers buying new televisions to pay a small fee to help cover the cost of recycling old sets. But the legislation has not made it to a vote.

GETTING IT DONE LOCALLY

Still, there are plenty of local recyclers prepared for what they expect will eventually be an avalanche of computers and televisions that will need to be disposed.

At Back Thru the Future Computer Recycling in Sussex County, workers were sorting hundreds of PCs, servers, laptops, monitors, copiers and other electronics last week.

The majority of the equipment passing through the football-field-size warehouse in Ogdensburg comes from local corporations and businesses looking for somewhere to get rid of their outdated machines. But a small fraction comes from individuals willing to pay about \$20 to get rid of their old computer and monitor and another \$8 to have their hard drive shredded and melted.

The neatly organized warehouse has aisles and aisles of giant boxes where workers pile CDs, motherboards, hard drives, power cords, keyboards, nearly new laptops and old 5 1/4-inch floppy disks and tapes from another age.

"Nearly everything you find in today's desktop computers has a value," said Dan Bayha, vice president and chief financial officer of the 16-year-old company. "Nothing needs to be sent to a landfill."

Some of the computers and components are resold to companies willing to take used machines for a discount. Others are sent overseas where they will be broken down. The toxic mercury and lead will be extracted. The metals and circuits will be resold. Much of the plastic will be melted and made into new computers, Bayha said.

But the growing part of the recycling business is in the back of the warehouse, where a giant grinder shreds computer hard drives, Blackberrys and cell phones into inch-long scraps of metal and plastic. The pieces are then shipped to a smelter, which melts them down.

In return, corporations concerned about protecting company secrets and individuals concerned about identity theft get a certificate promising the data contained on their computers is gone for good.

"There's no such thing as a good hard drive. They should all be killed," Bayha said.

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