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What to do with E-waste

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Our increased reliance on personal technology -- laptops, cell phones, computer monitors, printers -- has resulted in vast quantities of garbage in landfills that could have been reused or recycled. Two million tons of tech trash ended up in landfills in 2005, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, and only about 380,000 tons were recycled. If Americans recycled the more than 100 million cell phones that are no longer used, the amount of energy saved would be enough to power approximately 18,500 U.S. households for one year.

Some of the materials in personal electronics, such as lead, mercury and cadmium, are hazardous and can release dangerous toxins into our air and water when burned or deposited in landfills improperly. And throwing away metal components, like the copper, gold, silver and palladium in cell phones and other electronics, leads to needless mining for new metals.

Consumers, manufacturers and retailers can all help ensure that older electronics find new homes or new uses. The resources below will help you recycle, donate or resell your unwanted gadgets and keep them out of the waste stream.

RECYCLE

Depending on where you live and the products you want to recycle, you can:

- Find an e-waste collection event in your town
- Send your used tech stuff back to the manufacturer
- Head to a nearby retailer that accepts old electronics
- You may also be able to take advantage of the United States Postal Service's free e-waste recycling program. As of 2008, 1,500 post offices will provide free envelopes for you to mail back small electronics such as inkjet cartridges, PDAs, digital cameras and MP3 players. USPS started the program in 10 areas

across the country, including Washington, D.C., Chicago, Los Angeles and San Diego, but may expand it to other regions if it proves successful.

Most e-waste recycling services are free, but some charge a fee (around \$10) to take back a computer or a box of old electronics. See the following list of manufacturers, retailers and databases of local recycling services to find the best option for you. You may also want to contact your city or county solid waste management agency to find out about e-waste collection events near you.

E-Waste Recycling Organizations

Wireless...The New Recyclable (for used cell phones)

Basel Action Network

National Recycling Coalition

E-Cycling Central

Manufacturer Take-Back Programs

This list does not include every manufacturer that accepts used products. Check out your manufacturer's website to find out its recycling policy -- terms and conditions for take-back can vary widely between companies.

Advertisement

Apple (also provides free other-brand cell phone and battery recycling at retail stores)

Dell

Hewlett-Packard

Sony

Gateway

Nokia

Motorola

Retailers

This list does not include every retailer that accepts used products. Check out your retailer's website to find out its recycling policy -- programs can vary widely between retailers.

Staples

Office Depot

Best Buy

KNOW WHERE IT GOES

The key to responsible tech recycling is knowing where your stuff will end up. Watch out for any recycler who ships discarded electronics to developing countries for processing. Avoiding sending our garbage

overseas saves on greenhouse gas emissions and helps protect workers in developing countries. As reported in a 2006 OnEarth Magazine article, upwards of 80 percent of the world's e-waste is transported to Asia, and most of it winds up in China. Workers who disassemble consumer electronics by hand are exposed to toxic substances, which also contaminate groundwater. The Basel Action Network provides a list of recyclers who have pledged to recycle domestically and to follow environmental guidelines. You can also help ensure that local e-waste collection events are contracting with reputable recyclers by asking organizers to publicize the names of the recycling companies involved.

DONATE OR SELL

Giving away or selling used electronics are great ways to extend their use and keep them out of landfills. The EPA and eBay provide lists of organizations that accept donations of used electronics. Some services provide second-hand computers to schools or nonprofits, so your old computer could become a valuable tool for someone in need.

TAKE ACTION

The Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), along with the Electronics Take Back Coalition, is working to establish e-waste recycling laws in states around the country. Right now 11 states (California, Connecticut, Maine, Maryland, Minnesota, Oregon, North Carolina, Texas, Washington, Virginia and West Virginia) have laws in place that mandate recycling of discarded electronics. Numerous other states are also moving towards enacting e-waste laws. In 2008, New York City passed the nation's first comprehensive municipal electronics recycling law. Federal e-waste legislation is likely some years away.

NRDC backs e-waste laws that require manufacturers to assume responsibility for taking back and recycling their used products. Such laws -- which have been adopted by almost all states that have passed e-waste legislation to date -- encourage the design of less toxic, more easily recyclable gadgets. NRDC also supports strict manufacturer reporting requirements and other measures to limit the export of e-waste abroad.

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