

Electronic waste and recycling

Electronic waste includes TVs, computers, ipods, cell phones and any other item with electrical components. We all use them, but where do they go when they are discarded? If you have ever disposed of any electronic waste in the Valley you can't do it by donating it to area thrift stores. Even if they work, many of these appliances are too bulky, and local stores would be overwhelmed if they accepted them. So what can you do? Ventura County's Integrated Waste Management website is listed below, with programs that accept e-waste and their requirements. We have also listed below some basic facts about the growing problem of electronic waste, what happens to it after it leaves our hands, and how, for better or worse, we are dealing with it.

Facts about E-waste from the EPA:

- In 2005, unwanted electronics amounted to approximately 1.9 to 2.2 million tons, and 1.5 to 1.9 million tons were discarded in landfills while only 345,000 to 379,000 tons were recycled.
- By 2005, more than 250 million personal computers had become obsolete. The average lifespan of a PC was 4.5 years in 1992 and 2 years in 2005.
- 75 percent of the equipment being recycled comes from electronics manufacturers and large organizations (>500 employees). In the U.S., the top 5 firms recycle more than all the others combined. Only a small amount of electronics is being recovered from households.
- Toxic substances in electronics are lead, mercury, cadmium and brominated flame retardants.
- In almost all cases, collected cell phones that are obsolete or irreparable are sent to environmentally sound smelters in Canada or Europe for recovery of metals.
- If the 100 million cell phones discarded in 2006 had been recycled, we would have saved enough energy to power approximately 194,000 US households with electricity for one year.
- Cell phones contain copper, gold, silver, and palladium. If we recycled those same 100 million cell phones, 3.4 metric tons of gold, 1600 metric tons of copper, 35 metric tons of silver, and 1.5 metric tons of palladium could be recovered and save 5.5 million tons of loose soil, sand, and rock from being moved and reducing greenhouse gases caused by their mining.

What the EPA has and doesn't have in place:

- The EPA does not have "approved methods" for electronic recyclers; they have issued a set of voluntary [Guidelines for Material Management](#) under their Plug-In to Recycling Program and recommend looking for recyclers that adhere to these practices.
- The EPA Guidelines for Material Management encourages anyone who handles used electronic equipment to reuse, refurbish, and recycle; take precautions to reduce emissions and exposures to workers and the environment; provide special handling of components; ensure exported electronic products are being sent for legitimate reuse, recycling or refurbishment; and ensure that downstream recycling, refurbishing and disposal facilities follow their guidelines.
- The EPA does not plan to have a certification program for electronic recyclers. Instead it is working with states, e-manufacturers, e-recyclers, trade associations and public interest groups to develop a voluntary program which assures the environmental performance of electronic recyclers.
- [Plug-In To recycling](#) is the partnership between EPA and electronic manufacturers and retailers to offer consumers more opportunities to donate or recycle their used electronics.

The Basel Convention:

- The Basel Convention, an environmental agreement that regulates the import and export of hazardous waste among its parties, establishes legal obligations to ensure that wastes are managed in an environmentally sound manner. It contains guidelines on environmentally sound management of certain waste streams, waste treatment and waste management practices, along with guidelines on monitoring and detecting illegal traffic in hazardous waste.
- The Basel Convention, negotiated under the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP), was signed by the U.S. in 1990 and the US Senate recommended ratification in 1992. The U.S. has refused to ratify it

Toughening our environmental stance:

- According to the United Nations Environmental Program (UNEP) website: Encourages treating wastes as near as possible to where they were generated and minimizing international movements of hazardous wastes. Reducing wastes at the source will reduce the financial incentives that drive the illegal dumping that inspired the Basel Convention's adoption 17 years ago.
- According to European Union statistics, cited by National Geographic, countries such as Denmark and Sweden recycle nearly all their own consumption of materials and actually recycle a higher percentage than they consume.
- Basel Action Network (B.A.N.), a part of Earth Economics, is a Seattle based nonprofit focused on U.S. ratification of the Basel Convention. It works for both human rights and the environment in hopes of stopping the disproportionate and unsustainable dumping of the world's toxic waste and pollution on the globe's poorest residents.

To learn more:

Ventura County Hazardous Waste Programs: <http://www.wasteless.org/5hazwast.html>

California EPA: <http://www.calepa.ca.gov/Programs/Electronics/>

These facts alone cannot reflect the huge long term human health cost behind improper handling of e-waste and so we have listed some additional sites below.

National Geographic coverage of ewaste in the third world:

http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2005/11/1108_051108_electronic_waste.html

B.A.N. website: http://www.ban.org/main/about_Basel_Ban.html