

New program makes sure e-waste is recycled right

April 26 2010, By Julie Schmit

More companies and recyclers are taking steps to ensure that old electronic devices such as TVs and computers aren't dumped in poor countries.

The Basel Action Network, a Seattle-based non-profit that largely exposed the overseas dumping of U.S. [electronic waste](#), launched a program earlier this month to use third-party auditors to certify recyclers who don't export hazardous electronic waste.

The so-called eSteward recyclers will also agree not to dump the waste in U.S. landfills and agree to meet other criteria.

The certification is intended to provide companies and consumers with some assurance that the waste, which can include toxins such as lead and mercury, is disposed of safely.

The Government Accountability Office, in a 2008 report, declared that U.S. electronic waste was often disposed of unsafely in such countries as China and India. There, workers reclaim gold, silver and copper within the waste, often in open-air acid baths that leave a toxic sludge.

The Basel network says it also won assurances from 13 organizations, including Samsung, Bank of America, Wells Fargo, Capital One Financial and the Natural Resources Defense Council, that they'll use eSteward recyclers whenever possible.

Wells Fargo had already been using recyclers who pledged not to export. The eSteward pledge led to changes for others, says Jim Puckett, Basel's executive director. The Natural Resources Defense Council, for one, had not adequately tracked its e-waste, says the council's senior scientist, Allen Hershkowitz.

So far, Basel has certified three recyclers and seven sites.

Before eStewards, even companies who wanted to avoid export of electronic waste had to "hope for the best," when they handed their waste to recyclers, says Robert Houghton, president of Ohio-based [recycler](#) Redemtech. It is an eSteward and counts major companies among its customers. Now, "They can get some proof," Houghton says.

Basel's standards compete with another set launched in January. It was crafted by industry and backed by the Environmental Protection Agency.

That standard, dubbed R-2, doesn't ban the export of hazardous electronic waste but requires that it be handled safely. Instead of a ban, the Institute of Scrap Recycling Industries says, efforts should be made to help poor countries develop safe recycling.

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Distributed by McClatchy-Tribune Information Services.

Citation: New program makes sure e-waste is recycled right (2010, April 26) retrieved 1 May 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2010-04-e-waste-recycled.html>

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