

Environmental experts urge computer recycling

■ Throwing computers away in landfills can leach lead, mercury and polyvinyl chloride into the ground and food chain

By Diane Huber
for the Emerald

As technology speeds ahead to create more efficient computers, older, useless versions are piling up in landfills. According to environmentalists, dumping computers in the trash is hazardous for the environment.

While recycling old PCs is a relatively new concept in Eugene, manufacturers of electrical and electronic equipment in the European Union are mandated to take back and recycle obsolete computers, which leaves some environmentalists wondering why the United States is so technologically ahead but so environmentally behind.

A recent study by the National Safety Council's Environmental Health Center estimated that of the 20.6 million personal computers that became outdated in 1998, only 11 percent — or 2.3 million — were recycled.

NSC estimates that 315 million additional computers will be useless by 2004.

"The bridge we're trying to cross right now is how to recycle them," Oregon Department of Environmental Quality waste reduction analyst Brian Fuller said.

Computers that wind up in landfills contain toxic chemicals such as lead, mercury and polyvinyl chloride. Though landfills are designed to contain what's put into them, Fuller said landfills could potentially leak, leaching chemicals into the ground where they will remain forever, moving their way through food chains.

Recycling an old computer

BRING Recycling Television and Computer Recycling Roundup:
10 a.m. - 4 p.m. May 11 at the Glenwood Central Receiving Station
Oregon Public Networking:
(503) 448-9637
Students Repairing Used Technology (SIRUT):
(888) 990-7500

But Fuller and other environmentalists say there's no demand or pressure in the United States for companies to recycle computers.

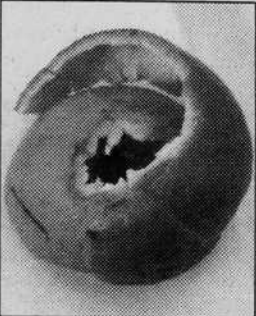
"U.S. companies claim it's too expensive and too hard to coordinate," Environmental Law Alliance Worldwide information and technology manager Glenn Gillis said. Yet, he pointed to recovery policies in Europe that require companies to recycle computers free of charge.

In the United States, third parties usually handle the recycling, Gillis said. For example, Hillsboro-based Students Recycling Used Technology has been repairing and recycling old computers and building new ones for distribution in schools since 1996. Oregon Public Networking, St. Vincent DePaul Society and BRING Recycling also collect computers in Eugene.

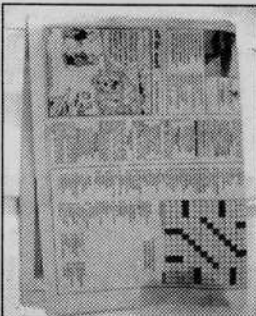
BRING general manager Julie Daniel said computer recycling is fairly new to Oregon. BRING has organized three Lane County pickups over the last two years — the first countywide pickups in the state.

On May 11, the company will


Guess how long these products will take to decompose:




1. Orange peel




2. Newspaper




3. Plastic bottle



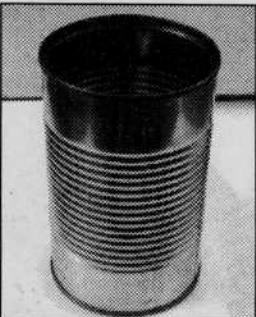
4. Aluminium can



5. Wood stick



6. Styrofoam cup



7. Tin can

a. 100 years
b. 6 months
c. Never
d. 13 years
e. 1 month
f. 500 years

Answers: 1. b, 2. e, 3. c, 4. f, 5. d, 6. c, 7. a

hold another pickup at the Glenwood Central Receiving Station from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m.. What's unique about this pickup is that BRING will also collect console televisions — "those great big ones your grandparents have," Daniel said. Televisions contain some of the same toxins as computers, she said.

"The purpose is to keep this material out of the landfill," Daniel said.

Once the company collects the computers, it distributes some to St. Vincent DePaul, where they are resold. Completely unusable computers are "demanufactured" and some of the parts are resold, while plastics and cables are recycled.

Computer companies are beginning to recognize the need to offer recycling as well. IBM has recently implemented Product-End-of-Life Management — a program that distributes or recycles unwanted computers for a fee of \$29.99.

This is still a long way from Europe's strict policies, Gillis said.

"It's not practical for American consumers to pay when they could just throw it in the trash," he said.

Gillis said he wonders why U.S. consumers don't demand that companies be more accountable.

"It's an interesting commentary on our priorities," he said. "Consumers (in Europe) are more aware of the issue. They don't have the same amount of space for landfills, and in general there's not quite the same disposable consumer mindset. They're more open to regulation."

"But regulation in this country is kind of a dirty word."

E-LAW executive director Bern Johnson added that many countries in Europe look at environmental protection differently than the United States out of necessity — their landscapes have already been so damaged that they have little choice but to "live in harmony with the environment."

"European countries have realized that 'this is where we live. There are limits,'" he said. "The U.S. will get to that approach. Right now, we're way behind."


Diane Huber is a freelance reporter for the Emerald.

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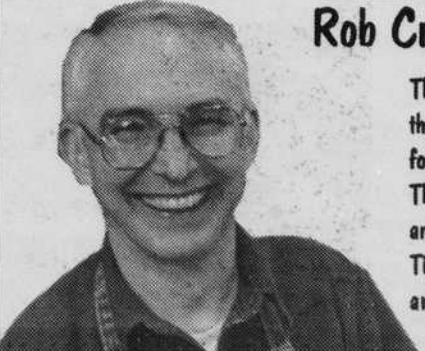
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