

EPA Lets Electronic Waste Flow Freely, GAO Report Says

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The Environmental Protection Agency has done little to curb the export of discarded electronic products containing hazardous waste, much of which ends up in poorly regulated countries and harms the environment and public health, the Government Accountability Office concluded in a report being released today. The 63-page report -- commissioned by House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Howard L. Berman (D-Calif.) -- is a scathing critique of the EPA's failure to control the export of used electronic equipment, which often is sent to China, India and other countries to be dismantled under unsafe conditions. U.S. authorities have yet to develop a national approach for handling the waste, which often contains toxic metals such as lead, mercury and cadmium. Amounts are rapidly growing as consumers replace their laptops, cellphones and televisions. "It's a really inadequate situation that we've allowed to continue," said Berman, whose panel is holding a hearing on the issue today. "We have a regulation where, as far as I can tell, there's no effort to enforce it."

EPA spokesman Timothy Lyons took issue with the report, saying the agency is working hard to enforce a January 2007 rule that requires the EPA to oversee the export of cathode-ray tubes. "In the 18 months since the CRT rule went into effect, EPA initiated 20 investigations, recently issued one complaint and entered into one settlement," Lyons wrote in an e-mail. "Improving compliance with the rule is our top priority as we continue our efforts to educate the public and the regulated community about the new rule, and take enforcement action when necessary." But it was GAO officials who alerted the EPA to violations by Jet Ocean Technology, a company in Chino, Calif., from which the EPA is now seeking a \$32,500 penalty. Company officials could not be reached to comment yesterday. The report said that dozens of other U.S. companies are circumventing the CRT rule, while other electronics containing toxic materials are flowing overseas with no restrictions. The EPA cannot identify where 80 percent of U.S. electronic waste is headed, it said. "U.S. law allows the unfettered export of nearly all types of used electronic devices," the report said. And though the agency has a regulation that governs disposal of cathode-ray tubes, the "EPA has done little" to set up an enforcement program.

Toxic materials in electronics do not leach out while the products remain intact, but once they are disassembled, the ingredients can enter the air and water. A 2007 study in the journal *Environmental Health Perspectives* found that children in Guiyu, a Chinese village where discarded electronics are dismantled, have lead levels in blood that are 50 percent higher than limits set by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Democratic Reps. Mike Thompson (Calif.), Gene Green (Tex.) and Bart Gordon (Tenn.) have tried for several years to broker a consensus on electronic recycling among the players, which include manufacturers as well as retailers and state and local governments. "We're making progress," Thompson said, but "it's really hard to find any community of interest that says, 'Why don't you develop some laws and regulate and tell me how to do my business?'" "

Thompson has drafted legislation calling for manufacturers to take more extended responsibility for their products and requiring manufacturers, retailers and recyclers to share the task of creating a national program to collect, transport, reuse and recycle electronic waste. Currently the issue is addressed by a patchwork of e-waste laws enacted by 16 states and New York City. Fifteen states require manufacturers to pay the cost of recycling their products. Parker Bruggs, vice president for environmental affairs for the Consumer Electronics Association, said manufacturers, retailers, consumers and governments all must play a role. "Our position is it should be a shared responsibility among all stakeholders," Bruggs said. "It's really a resource conservation issue; there are valuable components in these products that can be reused." The report said some U.S. recycling companies are lying about their environmental credentials. By setting up fictional brokers in Hong Kong, India, Pakistan, Singapore and Vietnam, GAO investigators found that 43 U.S. recyclers were violating the CRT regulations, yet nearly all of them touted their environmental friendliness on their Web sites. One Denver area company that illegally shipped CRT monitors overseas boasts on its Web site that "your e-waste is recycled properly, right here in the United States, not simply dumped on somebody else."

Some environmental groups, such as the Electronics TakeBack Coalition, argue that the United States should ban the export of all electronics that are due to be dismantled. Casey Harrell, an international toxics campaigner for the advocacy group Greenpeace, said policymakers and consumers must also pressure manufacturers to make more environmentally friendly products in the first place.