

THE INSTITUTION RECYCLING NETWORK



Electronics Recycling: Pipe Dreams and Realities

Some ancient recyclers will remember Evel Knievel and the Snake River Canyon. Evel tried to jump the canyon and ended up in the river. There was no way across.

There's a Snake River of sorts in electronics recycling. The canyon is about twenty cents wide, often wider. On one side are deals from people who buy old computer and monitors or take them away for free. Sometimes they offer to pay two to four dollars a monitor, working or not, and they'll pay for freight. Sometimes they offer to spot a trailer or container at no cost.

On the other side are deals that charge to recycle computers and monitors. The price starts at about twenty cents a pound and goes up from there.

Make no mistake; these offers are not comparable.

If you get an offer to take monitors (or TVs) away for free or pay you for them, most or all of them will be packed in containers and sent overseas. Maybe to China, maybe to India, maybe to Mexico. What happens once they get overseas is anybody's guess. Some may be refurbished and re-used, but most get hammered apart for their metal components. What is certain is that their disposition is not controlled, ultimately they will end up in a ditch or scattered on the ground, and they will be handled under conditions that expose workers to grave environmental, health and safety hazards.

The alternative, starting at a cost of about \$0.20 per pound: monitors and CPUs are processed here in the United States, capturing glass, metals, plastics, and usable components. The recycling process is subject to U.S. laws and permit requirements, and the resulting materials are recycled with appropriate safety and environmental controls. All of this costs money, and there's just no way around the economics. Fifteen to thirty cents a pound, at the plant, is the cost to recycle electronics appropriately.

We know this is true. We have visited dozens of electronics recyclers, from coast to coast and Texas to Iowa. We have chased down the no-cost deals. We've visited the sites, we've seen the operations. We've seen the containers packed for export. We've also seen the reputable recyclers, and audited their operations, too. And there just aren't any exceptions; if the deal is close to zero or better, electronics are being packed and sent overseas.

The export of monitors for offshore "recycling" is not, in most cases, illegal. But according to most in the electronics industry and the electronics recycling industry, and to most IRN members, it is socially, ethically, and environmentally unacceptable.

IRN members are getting the best pricing we can find for environmentally and socially responsible recycling of monitors and other electronics. The reason we get and pass along this excellent pricing and excellent service is simple: the clout that the IRN brings to the market as a collective. Our members recycled over 1.6 million pounds of electronics through the IRN in 2006. This makes us one of the largest, if not the largest single account in the region. We get the pricing and service that that volume deserves, and we pass those benefits along.

Whether you're an IRN member or not, if you see an offer for a better electronics recycling deal, we hope you'll let us know, so that we can chase it down. If the deal's legitimate, we need to know that, because we need to grab that benefit and pass it along. That's our job. If the deal appears shady, we can let you know, but keep your name out of the conversation. We can also get you in for a site audit, if you'd like that.

And if you want to take the zero cost or better "deals", we'll be happy to talk about the issues involved and the questions you should ask before you accept such a deal. But be clear, if it's a no cost deal, or even close to that, your electronics are headed offshore.

There is in fact a huge chasm between responsible recycling of electronics in the U.S. and the packed containers heading overseas. There's no way around that fact. There's no way around the difference in price. And there's no way around the environmental and social implications. If you want more information, including news and technical reports investigating offshore recycling practices, please give us a call.

Institutional recycling solutions

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