



WALTER BIERI, KEYSTONE

RECYCLING EFFORT: Computer monitors are stored at a recycling plant for electronic devices in Regensdorf, Switzerland. Most U.S. electronics aren't recycled.

Digital dumping piles up

By MICHAEL DOSS
THE ORANGE COUNTY REGISTER

What happens when electronic equipment dies? According to the Environmental Protection Agency, 2.05 million tons of electronic waste are laid to rest in landfills each year in the United States. This figure includes computers, monitors, consumer electronics and office equipment.

legal, depending on state and local laws. Since 2001 in California, it has been illegal to dispose of cathode ray tube, or CRT, monitors because of their high lead content.

Most electronics currently are not recycled, but new requirements are expected to increase the supply of gadgets that can be given new life. Last year, then-Gov. Gray Davis signed a law requiring manufacturers to pay for recycling discarded electronics

equipment. According to the EPA, just 11 percent of personal computers retired in the United States were recycled in 2001.

Environmentalists oppose the dumping in landfills of hazardous material such as lead in televisions and monitors and small amounts of other elements in electronic scrap. TVs and computers can contain an average of 4 pounds of lead, depending on their size, make and age.

In addition to computers and electronics, cellular telephones are becoming an increasing problem in landfills. The EPA says mobile phones will be discarded at a rate of 130 million per year by 2005, resulting in 65,000 tons of waste.

Recycling programs have failed to find new life for many of the country's old cell phones. Four national wireless recycling programs collected just 2.5 million phones

from 1999 through early 2003, according to research firm Inform Inc. There are about 148 million cellular subscribers in the United States.

A network of charities, wireless companies and refurbishing firms have sprung up to collect and recycle old phones. Some phones are cleaned and resold in Latin America or Asia, and the rest are recycled for parts.

Disposal of other electronics is still a problem, however.

Because monitors contain so many toxic components and are not permitted in California landfills, individuals must find private recyclers or companies to handle the trash.

Other computer components and electronics also have similar rules for disposal.

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

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