

Prison E-waste Recycling

by Catherine Komp

Inmates face hazards for pennies an hour

This sidebar is associated with a full-length news article, [Barely Regulated, E-waste Piles Up in U.S., Abroad.](#)

While much of the "e-waste" discarded across the country is "recycled" by brokers who send the old computers, monitors and televisions to "developing" nations without laws regulating the health or safety implications of their processing and disposal, some marginalized communities in the United States also face hazards from dismantling the toxic products.

Prison recycling programs at a number of federal penitentiaries have violated health and safety standards, according to whistleblowers and environmental groups.

Prisoners at the federal maximum-security Atwater prison in California used hammers to break computer terminals down for recycling, which caused the release of heavy-metal particles. The problem was only addressed after Leroy Smith, the safety manager at Atwater, filed a complaint with the Occupational Safety & Health Administration and sought whistleblower protections in early 2005.

Seven other federal prisons have electronics recycling plants, including Elkton, Ohio; Fort Dix, New Jersey; and Texarkana, Texas.

"Because the US as a country is not embracing this very significant large volume and hazardous waste problem, what we're doing is pushing it offshore, [and] we're pushing it to prisoners," said Sarah Westervelt, e-waste program coordinator with the Basel Action Network, an international environmental organization.

More than a year after Smith's disclosure, the US Office of Special Counsel finally issued a response last month, faulting the Federal Bureau of Prisons for failing to address inmates' exposure to toxins like lead and cadmium in the computer recycling operations.

Even Scott Bloch, the head of the US Office of Special Counsel heavily criticized for relative inaction in protecting federal employees' rights at work, called for a "thorough, independent and impartial investigation into recycling operations at [Bureau of Prisons] institutions."

Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility (PEER), along with Smith's lawyer, Mary Dryovage, say the Justice Department should open a full investigation into alleged health and safety violations perpetrated by UNICOR, the government-owned corporation that runs industry programs at federal penitentiaries.

Businesses, federal agencies and local governments have contracted UNICOR to recycle their e-waste, resulting in \$9 million in sales in 2005. According to its financial reports, UNICOR employs 951 inmates in its recycling plants, paying them between 23 cents and \$1.15 per hour.

"The Bureau of Prisons scapegoats its employees while UNICOR makes millions off the backs of the staff and inmates who are being poisoned by exposure to toxics," Dryovage said.

© 2006 [The NewStandard](#). All rights reserved. The NewStandard is a non-profit publisher that encourages noncommercial reproduction of its content. Reprints must prominently attribute the author and The NewStandard, hyperlink to <http://newstandardnews.net> (online) or display newstandardnews.net (print), and carry this notice. For more information or commercial reprint rights, please see the TNS [reprint policy](#).

[The NewStandard ceased publishing on April 27, 2007.](#)