

BUSINESS BRIEFING

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Environmentalists fault Dell on recycling of PCs

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LAS VEGAS — Environmentalists dressed in prison uniforms circled a collection of dusty computers outside the Consumer Electronics Show on Thursday to protest Dell Computer Corp.'s use of inmates to recycle computers.

"I lost my job. I robbed a store. Went to jail. I got my job back," chanted five mock prisoners wearing "Dell Recycling Team" signs and linked by chains.

While Dell executives, including company Chairman Michael Dell, gathered at the huge electronics convention, the "high-tech chain gang," members of the Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition, attracted a small crowd outside. The coalition says Dell's computer recycling program is a sham, and Dell is putting prison workers in danger because they are not protected by federal Occupational Health and Safety Administration standards.

"Dell is an environmental laggard," said protester Fred Kirsch, 26.

The coalition also complains that instead of using cheap prison labor, Dell could provide others with jobs.

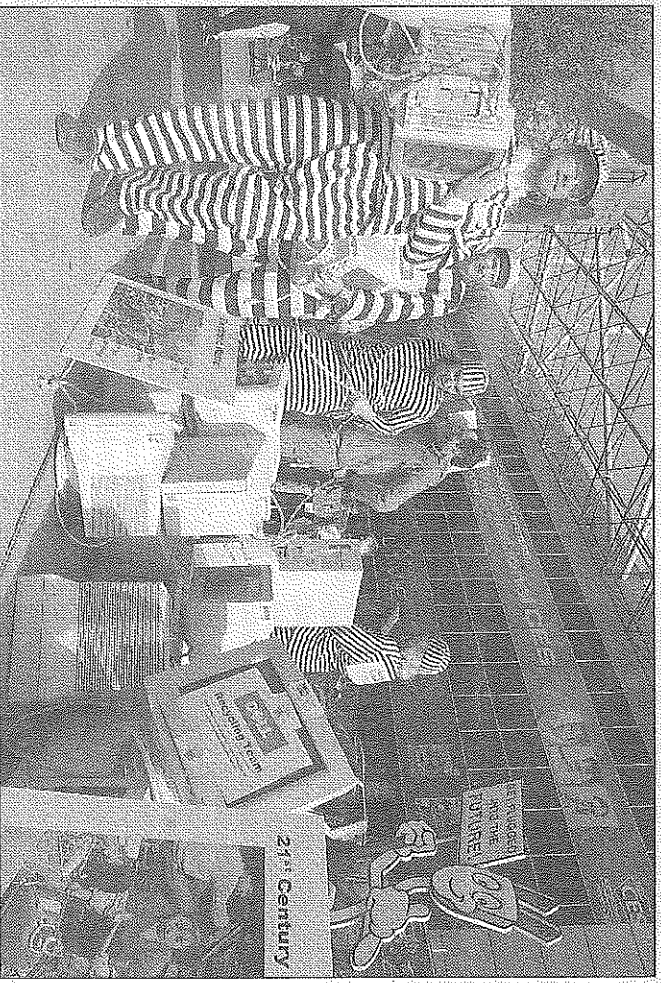
The nation's top-selling computer manufacturer deals with a U.S. government contractor, UNICOR, which employs prison inmates to recycle outdated computers.

Dell spokesman Bryant Hilton acknowledged that the prison labor saves the company money but said inmates' working conditions meet all OSHA standards.

Dell's program lets owners of obsolete Dell equipment pay shipping costs to return their computers, but they do not have to pay any additional costs associated with recycling in the Dell Exchange program.

Ted Smith, executive director of the coalition, said Dell doesn't do much to promote the program.

Hilton said the protest was partially the result of miscommunication and that his company and the coalition have the same goal. "I think our challenge now is educating



Joe Cavaretta ASSOCIATED PRESS

Texas Campaign for the Environment members dress as prisoners in Las Vegas on

our customers about what their options are," he said. "I think there's a lack of awareness of what to do with an old computer."

Also Thursday, a new report by the toxics coalition said U.S. technology companies lag foreign rivals in reducing hazardous materials in electronic devices, exposing gadget-hungry Americans to toxins whenever they use computers.

The nonprofit Computer Takeback Campaign says computer companies should charge a fee every time they sell a PC to cover the cost of taking it back and recycling it when the user is done with it.

The group released a report card Thursday during the Consumer Electronics Show, rating companies on their environmental efforts. Nineteen of 28 companies were rated

Thursday to protest Dell's use of a contractor that employs inmates to recycle computers.

"poor." Only one received a passing grade, although the group's criteria aren't spelled out specifically.

Robin Schneider, director of the Texas Campaign for the Environment, said Dell's recycling program is fatally flawed because it requires the user to pay the cost of shipping an old computer back to Dell. The cost of shipping a PC and its monitor from Chicago to Round Rock, for instance, would be about \$52.

Schneider said IBM Corp. uses a similar campaign, which collected fewer than 1,000 machines in its first two years. During the past two years, IBM sold about 5 million PCs in the United States alone.

Last year, demonstrators mounted a similar protest outside Dell's annual shareholder meeting in Austin.