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"First the blade, then the ear, then the full grain in the ear."

THE MONITOR'S VIEW

DELETING COMPUTER WASTE

Computers have short lives. College students need the latest laptop. Teens seek souped-up models for game play. Adults ogle new flat-panel screens. And old computers pile up in attics, basements, and garages — or worse, in landfills as toxic waste.

Between 1997 and 2007, nearly surrounding groundwater.

half a billion personal computers in The Commerce overview suggests the US will have become obsolete, that the US strive to arrive at a unified national system for recycling of all obsolete electronics are simply computers and other e-waste, a policy that would benefit both consumers and manufacturers. And it may be unsure of the right way to dispose of their unwanted high-tech appliances.

Donating a used computer to a worthy charity is a great first option. But equipment that is too old or inoperable needs to be recycled.

Older computer monitors contain an average of four pounds of lead, an environmental hazard. A virtual who's who of the rest of the periodic table of elements may be inside, including toxic metals such as mercury and cadmium. Components also may be made of flame-retardant plastics that have been shown to pose health hazards.

The European Union's Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment directive makes producers responsible for accepting and recycling computers from consumers free of charge.

The US is acting more slowly. In July, the Commerce Department released an overview of e-waste policies but failed to mandate any immediate action. Meanwhile, four states — California, Maine, Maryland, and Washington — have passed electronics recycling laws. Five — California, Maine, Massachusetts, Minnesota, and New Hampshire — have banned cathode-ray tubes (the bulky "picture tube" in older TVs and computer monitors) from disposal in landfills, because toxic materials could leach out into

With a half billion obsolete computers piling up, the US must get serious about recycling electronics.

Some computermakers already are seeing the light. At the moment, Dell is dealing with a corporate fiasco as it recalls more than 4 million notebook computer batteries that could ignite a fire. The batteries are made by Sony.

But the company also deserves credit for boosting its recycling efforts. In June, it announced that beginning next month it will pick up and recycle at no charge any of its old products. Customers are not required to buy a new Dell computer. For \$10 Dell will pick up and recycle up to 50 pounds of computer equipment made by any other manufacturer. The company also has committed to reducing or eliminating toxic materials in its future products.

Hewlett-Packard already has set a high standard in producing "green" electronics and in recycling. With these top manufacturers on board, the industry looks to be headed in the right direction. But the public and policymakers should watch to see whether it will need a nudge from government as well. ■