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Joint press release by the German Federal Ministry for Environment, Nature Conservation and Nuclear Safety (BMU)

Export of waste electrical and electronic equipment (WEEE): plenty of gold, and poison, too

Röttgen and Flasbarth: Study shows need for action to promote ecological recycling

More than 155,000 tonnes of what is sometimes hazardous electronic waste are exported annually from Germany to non-European destinations, a volume which includes some 50,000 tonnes of PC and television monitors alone. The latter often contain metals as well as flame-retardant bromide compounds such as hazardous polybrominated diphenyl ether (PentaBDE). Even defective appliances are often reclassified as "functional", then usually shipped to Asia and Africa where they are only rarely recycled ecologically. These are the findings of a new study commissioned by the Federal Environment Agency (UBA), which was presented at CEBIT in Hannover today.

Federal Minister for Environment Dr. Norbert Röttgen said, "The study illustrates the scale of illegal export of WEEE while also pointing out that further measures to solve the problem are necessary. The Federal government is calling for a decisive regulation at the European level by which exporters must provide proof that exported devices are in working order and not in fact waste, and for exporters to bear the costs of periodic checks. The appropriate authorities in Germany must step up monitoring of collection points and exports so as to curb the detrimental impact on environment and health of criminal trade.

"Not only do many hazardous materials leave the country in used electronic equipment, but valuable raw materials such as gold, copper, platinum or indium are also exiting the raw materials cycle here at home", said UBA President Jochen Flasbarth. "As long as ecological recycling is technically and satisfactorily possible in Europe or similar regions only, equipment and its components should be reused here. It makes economic sense to recycle valuable raw materials appropriately, especially many metals, considering the rise in global market prices", continued Flasbarth.

UBA's President also made an appeal to continue improvement of recycling standards in Asia and Africa through technology transfer. Producers of new equipment are also called upon to design products more ecologically.

In their one-and-a-half-year-long study experts from the Hamburg Institute for Environmental Strategies (Ökopol) compiled the most solid information as yet on the origin and volume of exported devices. The equipment came from flea markets, second hand shops or were retrieved from junk yards. From there it is often transported via collection points for export, usually by sea. Besides harmless metallic raw materials, WEEE also houses a host of hazardous materials which must be recycled properly to avoid harming human health and the environment. An old computer contains more than 100 different materials, and conventional monitors contain lamps which must also be disposed of professionally.

The study findings are to be forwarded to affected stakeholders, in particular the *Laender*, concerned federal ministries, municipal umbrella organisations, environmental and economic associations, and the European Commission with a request that they review any pertinent proposed measures.

The *Optimierung der Steuerung und Kontrolle grenzüberschreitender Stoffströme bei Elektroaltgeräten/Elektroschrott* study (in German with English-language summary) is available as a free download at http://www.umweltbundesamt.de/uba-info-medien/mysql_medien.php?anfrage=Kennnummer&Suchwort=3769. A background paper is available at www.bmu.de.

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