Dell Bans E-Waste Export to Developing Countries

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SEATTLE (AP) --PC maker Dell Inc. on Tuesday formally banned the export of broken computers, monitors and parts to developing countries amid complaints that lax enforcement of environmental and worker-safety regulations have allowed an informal and often hazardous electronic-waste recycling industry to emerge.

Although Dell's announcement does not mark a significant change in the PC maker's behavior, environmental groups hope that by making its standards public, Dell will raise the bar for other electronics makers.

In the absence of U.S. regulations, those groups are banking on competitive pressure to make companies improve their e-waste practices.

"This is very significant announcement," said Barbara Kyle, national coordinator of the Electronics Takeback Coalition, which has long pressured Dell and other electronics makers to improve their recycling programs. "It may seem like nuance, but what Dell's doing is drawing a very sharp and clear line and saying they won't cross it, in a way that is just much brighter and clearer than the way anyone else does it."

Environmental groups like Greenpeace and the Basel Action Network have tracked shipments of e-waste intended for recycling to countries such as China, Ghana and Nigeria and found computers, TVs and other electronics being dismantled by smashing or burning, exposing people to mercury, lead and other toxic chemicals.

No one knows exactly how much of the electronics turned over to recyclers ends up in such conditions, but Greenpeace and others say it could be 50 percent to 80 percent of the items collected in the U.S. for recycling.

That's despite broad acceptance of the Basel Convention, an international treaty that controls the movement of hazardous waste across borders. The U.S., which has no federal law against sending such e-waste to scrap dealers overseas, has yet to ratify the Basel Convention.

Dell, based in Round Rock, Texas, said it had already required contractors to keep e-waste out of developing countries. But until now, the company had not published as clear a policy for the handling of electronics collected by its consumer and business recycling programs — 290 million pounds in the five or so years since Dell started counting.

In its revised policy, Dell defined e-waste as any non-working parts or devices, and the company said none of that material can be exported from developed countries to developing ones. The Basel Convention's definition, by comparison, is based

more on whether materials contain toxic substances.

The PC maker contracts directly with about 25 recycling companies around the world; those companies, in turn, send out parts or shredded materials to a much wider network of subcontractors. To ensure compliance, Dell said it has already been auditing every one of those companies and tracks the electronics from the point of collection to its very last stop.

Dell's Mark Newton, a senior manager for environmental sustainability, said the PC maker chooses to work only with recyclers that comply with its standards to protect its reputation. When Dell learns that a recycler isn't compliant, the PC maker gives the recycler a chance to change. Companies that continue to fall below Dell's expectations get cut, Newton said.

"We have suppliers lining up to work with us. There are plenty of reputable suppliers," Newton said. "It's just a matter of time before companies operating on the margins lose the business of companies that are serious about doing this the right way."

Dell's policy does have exceptions. Raw materials that can go right back into manufacturing, like plastics that don't contain any harmful chemicals, or unleaded glass, can be sent to developing countries. There's also an exception for non-working parts or devices that need to be sent back to manufacturers in developing countries because of warranty agreements.

Dell competitors including HP and Apple Inc. offer some details about their own export policies. Apple said electronics turned over by consumers are processed in the country or region where they are collected. It also said it holds itself to Basel Convention standards of transporting hazardous waste. The company did not immediately respond to questions about computers that come in from businesses that could be repaired and resold.

HP's director of environmental sustainability, Bonnie Nixon, said in a statement that HP prohibits export of end-of-life electronics from developed to developing countries, with exceptions for warranty returns and similar cases.

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