SCRAP INDUSTRY E-WASTE EXPORT CLAIMS “SADLY MISTAKEN”

BAN Calls ISRI Electronics Recycling Study Interpretation Irresponsible

For immediate release:

Seattle, WA. October 17, 2011. A recent claim by the Institute of Scrap Recycling Industries that their recently commissioned study shows that e-waste exportation from the US to developing countries is no longer a problem, is “sadly mistaken” according to the toxic trade watchdog, Basel Action Network (BAN). BAN claims that ISRI first obtained badly compromised data from the study and then manipulated that to make their case rather than report what is obvious to everyone in the business and in journalism who has gone to China, Nigeria, India, Ghana and other global e-waste dumping grounds.

“The ISRI-sponsored report doesn’t pass the smell test,” says Jim Puckett, Executive Director of BAN. “Close analysis reveals it to be even worse than a case of garbage in, garbage out. ISRI puts its fingers on the scale of even the flawed data. The resulting conclusions are both inaccurate and irresponsible.”

The report, paid for by ISRI, but conducted by the International Data Corporation, is based on a voluntary survey of 182 companies, mostly recyclers. Part of the survey asked recyclers if they export e-waste, but according to BAN, any voluntary survey asking respondents to report shameful or illegal activity will not produce reliable data.

“Its like asking people if they cheat on their taxes and expecting an accurate result,” said Puckett. “If it were that easy the EPA would not be spending more than a million dollars right now to try to quantify volumes and waste flows from the US, and the extensive Government Accountability Office (GAO) report (2008) would have provided the figures at that time.”

But even assuming the responses were all honest, BAN notes that ISRI conveniently misinterprets the IDC data. ISRI’s Eric Harris presented the survey results that stated that only 20 percent claimed export and “78.66% of respondents say their output was traded, sold and/or transferred within the US – and that “much of this output is further sold into the US and global marketplace,” His mistaken conclusion was that “electronics are recycled in America, not ‘dumped’ overseas.” What he didn’t mention, and what ISRI’s subsequent press release fails to note, is that the 78.66% could easily include exports that move via US middlemen.
Most exporting recyclers use brokers that have US addresses, or sell to another company who then uses brokers. David Daoud, the IDC author of the report, confirmed that any number of these respondents could use such brokers to export e-waste and still remain in this 78.66% slice of the pie. This practice is common and was most recently demonstrated in the case of Intercon Solutions who, according to BAN, used brokers and agents to export the material to Hong Kong, where authorities turned back the shipments. So as much as 100% of the 78.66% could have been exported and, adding to that the 20 percent already claimed as exported, the study can also be interpreted as up to 100% of respondents’ material was exported.

Further, when it comes to processing activity, ISRI’s press release relies on more “smoke and mirrors.” The release reports that 70% of end-of-life electronics is processed in the US and sold at home or in the global marketplace as “commodity grade scrap.”

However, “commodity grade scrap” is not a meaningful term when it comes to judging how much hazardous e-waste is being exported to developing countries, most of whom are bound to the definitions found in the Basel Convention. ISRI invented scrap specifications, but they are meaningless when it comes to international trade rules such as the Basel Convention. Much of ISRI’s “commodity grade scrap” can be considered hazardous waste under international law. It is clear that the data has very little statistical value for deriving valid conclusions about the concern at hand – the export of hazardous e-waste to developing countries from the United States.

While there is no reliable trade data on e-waste, there is very significant anecdotal evidence (see Appendix below) indicating a very serious export problem remains, and it would be very foolish to ignore the problem just because we lack the numbers.

“If a doctor were to observe a massive hemorrhaging of a patient brought to the hospital, he would not wait to act until he had the numbers of how many liters of blood were lost,” said Puckett. “The responsible thing to do would be to take emergency action to staunch the flow. It is abundantly apparent that we need US legislation to end this despicable global dumping.

BAN and many environmental organizations have joined Dell, Apple, HP and Best Buy in supporting the Responsible Electronics Recycling Act now before Congress to prohibit export of hazardous e-waste to developing countries.

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APPENDIX

Some examples of mass exports of e-waste from the US

- In a presentation by Mr. Gary Tam, of the Environmental Protection Department of Hong Kong, he reported to INTERPOL that Hong Kong intercepted 322 illegal shipments – full containers – of hazardous e-waste 2007-09. The three-month average weight of intercepted illegal hazardous e-waste, at the end of that period, was about 150,000 tons. And that is just the tip of the iceberg.

- Likewise, the US EPA has been counting and collecting evidence. Along with the US Immigration and Customs Enforcement and Homeland Security, the EPA filed criminal charges against Executive Recycling for at least 300 incidents of illegal exporting of e-waste to developing countries between 2005 and 2008. (Toxic e-Waste Dumping Exposed)

- The US Government Accountability Office (GAO) set up fictional brokers in Hong Kong, India, Pakistan, Singapore and Vietnam, and caught scores of US recyclers illegally exporting e-waste. The 2008 report provides irrefutable evidence, and little has changed since publication to decrease opportunities for exporting.

- If you are not swayed by government reports, you can see evidence of US e-waste exporting with your own eyes. Credible sources, on the ground, such as Frontline (Ghana: Digital Dumping Ground) and CBS’s 60 Minutes offer photos and eye-witness accounts of ample of e-waste dumping in developing countries by US and European businesses.

- In the past three years, BAN itself has tracked 325 containers, 250 (or 77%) of which were exported from North America to Hong Kong, Vietnam and other developing countries. We have documented those containers leaving e-waste recycling facilities and informed competent authorities in country. In most cases, the governments have rejected these containers of e-waste, as illegal for import into their countries.