

**COMMITTEE ON FOREIGN AFFAIRS  
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES  
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20515**

**STATEMENT OF  
THE HONORABLE ENI F.H. FALEOMAVAEGA  
CHAIRMAN**

**before the  
SUBCOMMITTEE ON ASIA, THE PACIFIC, AND THE  
GLOBAL ENVIRONMENT**

**Electronic-Waste**

**September 17, 2008**

We live in a digital age that moves at a dizzying pace. We surround ourselves with dozens of electronic gadgets such as computers, blackberries, and cell phones, and it is difficult to imagine life without these crucial tools to help us process information and communicate.

The overwhelming speed at which technology develops requires that we constantly update our machines. We get new, faster and fancier products to replace our old units, which seem woefully out of date shortly after they are purchased.

As we continually upgrade, we face the question of what to do with our outgoing electronics as there is a growing understanding that our old method of filling up landfills with the products we discard is both unsustainable and potentially hazardous, as many products can leach poisons into the ground. In response to these environmental concerns, individuals and institutions are recycling their old computers and other machines in new ways, especially as they recognize the environmental benefit of reusing and recycling electronic parts.

With new opportunities to export old machines so that they can be used in poorer countries, many consumers get tremendous satisfaction knowing their old PC may help someone in a developing country learn computer skills or connect to the internet, perhaps

for the first time. But this positive trend of recycling so-called “electronic waste” – or e-waste – has a disturbing downside.

NGOs, and others, have monitored a growing trend of e-waste being exported to poorer countries where instead of being recycled responsibly, or reused, it is stripped down and dumped, causing dangerous environmental and health damage. Horrifying photos and accounts document how e-waste is sent to countries, mostly in Asia, where poor workers are paid a pittance to scavenge electronics parts for valuable metals, such as gold, silver, and copper.

To shed greater light on this important issue and what role the United States is playing in the worldwide export of e-waste, the Foreign Affairs Committee asked the Government Accountability Office to investigate what happens to e-waste that is exported from the United States, and what the US government is doing to prevent unlawful and potentially harmful e-waste exports. I commend the late Chairman Tom Lantos of the Foreign Affairs Committee and also our new Chairman, the Honorable Howard Berman, and our Ranking Member Congresswoman Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, for their leadership and initiative regarding this important matter.

GAO’s findings are troubling. GAO found that the trend of exporting e-waste to be disposed of in poor countries under harmful conditions is widespread and growing. Countries in Asia and Africa are fast becoming dumping grounds for the poisonous waste that the U.S. does not want in its own landfills.

Also, the methods for stripping e-waste in poor countries involve open flames, acid baths and other techniques that release poisons that harm the health of the workers. After the parts are picked apart, the remaining materials are left in an open pit, where more poisons seep into the ground, harming the surrounding environment and the people living in the vicinity. As a result, men, women and children, already in difficult situations, are being exposed to dangerous levels of toxins, whether they are actively involved in stripping e-waste or simply if they are unfortunate enough to live in an area where such activities take place.

The most insidious players in this game of dumping e-waste abroad are companies that claim to specialize in safely recycling waste electronics, but in fact illicitly dispose of the e-waste in developing countries. These companies essentially trick well-meaning consumers into thinking they are doing the right thing by recycling their electronics. In fact, GAO gives examples of companies that hold “Earth Day” events to collect used computers and other electronics for recycling, only to turn around and send the equipment overseas for a quick buck.

It is important to note that there are some recycling centers around the world that handle e-waste in a responsible and safe manner. But the concern is that the already massive amount of improperly handled e-waste will only grow with time, and the issue of harmful e-waste exports is likely to get worse before it gets better.

GAO notes that because of the eventual switch to high definition televisions and radios in the U.S., we will soon produce dramatically more e-waste that may be sent abroad. In addition, high commodity prices that make stripping e-waste for metals profitable means we are likely to encounter more and more companies eager to exploit opportunities by bringing e-waste to less developed countries in the future.

Of most concern is GAO's negative assessment of U.S. efforts to prevent this activity. The U.S. has some of the weakest export controls of hazardous waste of any industrialized nation. The GAO notes that the U.S. limits export controls of e-waste only to so-called CRTs (or cathode ray tubes) that are found in computer monitors and televisions. Other electronics that also pose a potential danger if they are improperly disposed of abroad have no controls whatsoever.

Not only are U.S. export rules narrow, they are being poorly enforced and are easily circumvented. GAO shows with compelling evidence that companies that want to ignore our export rules on e-waste have no fear of doing so. Indeed, as GAO will no doubt explain, during the few months of their investigation, GAO conducted more enforcement activities against suspect companies than the Environmental Protection Agency had conducted to date.

We look forward to hearing from the GAO's foremost expert on this topic about the findings in their important report, as well as their recommendations for how we can better prevent American e-waste from poisoning people in poorer countries around the world.

I now recognize our Ranking Member, my good friend, Mr. Manzullo, for his opening remarks.