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ONE HUNDRED ELEVENTH CONGRESS

# Congress of the United States

## House of Representatives

COMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND GOVERNMENT REFORM

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May 4, 2010

The Honorable Martha N. Johnson  
Administrator  
General Service Administration  
1800 F Street, NW  
Washington, DC 20405

Dear Ms. Johnson:

In recent years, rapid developments in technology have led to a surge in new, cutting edge electronic devices. However, this technological growth has been coupled with a potential new hazard: electronic waste (e-waste). I am concerned that, although some steps have been taken, not enough is being done to ensure that Federal agencies contract with responsible companies for the disposal and recycling of government e-waste.

While computer hardware generally lasts about seven years, most Federal equipment is only used for three years.<sup>1</sup> Thus, the Federal government disposes of approximately half a million computers per year.<sup>2</sup> This waste contains chemicals such as lead, mercury, cadmium, barium, and hexavalent chromium, which are known to be dangerous to public health and the environment. While some unused electronics are donated or reused, a large portion of these electronics are sent for recycling.

Abuses by companies who purport to safely dispose and recycle e-waste have been well documented. Numerous investigations and reports have revealed that companies routinely violate Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) regulations.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, these companies often simply export e-waste to developing countries. An estimated 50-80 percent of e-waste sent for

<sup>1</sup> "Recent Developments in Federal Electronic Stewardship," Office of the Federal Environmental Executive ([http://www.fedcenter.gov/\\_kd/Items/actions.cfm?action=Show&item\\_id=10137&destination=ShowItem](http://www.fedcenter.gov/_kd/Items/actions.cfm?action=Show&item_id=10137&destination=ShowItem)).

<sup>2</sup> "Federal Agencies Compete to Recycle and Reuse Electronic Products; Challenge Results in More than 15.8 Million Pounds of Electronics Reused or Recycled," Office of the Federal Environmental Executive (January 27, 2010) ([http://www.ofee.gov/errc\\_winners\\_2008-2009.asp](http://www.ofee.gov/errc_winners_2008-2009.asp)).

<sup>3</sup> "Electronic Waste: EPA Needs to Better Control Harmful US Exports through Stronger Enforcement and More Comprehensive Regulation," Government Accountability Office (August 2008).

recycling is sent to Asia.<sup>4</sup> In many cases, e-waste is dismantled under unsafe working conditions or ends up lining landfills abroad.<sup>5</sup>

As a result of the well-documented abuses by some e-waste recyclers, voluntary certification programs have emerged, which are designed to ensure the safe treatment of e-waste. For example, EPA, in conjunction with other entities, has developed the “Responsible Recycling” or “R2” certification process to ensure proper e-waste procedures. Similarly, a consortium of environmental groups called the Basel Action Network (BAN) has developed the “e-Stewards” program, another voluntary certification process designed to ensure safe recycling and exportation of e-waste. Further, Executive Order 13423, signed January 24, 2007, and codified February 17, 2009, mandates that agencies use “environmentally sound practices with respect to disposition of agency electronic equipment that has reached the end of its useful life.”

Despite this progress, more can be done. In its role overseeing the business of the Federal Government, GSA maintains a list of 60 waste recycling contractors at Schedule 899-5 of the Federal Supply Schedules (FSS). It appears that only two companies on that list are R2 certified and only one company is e-Steward certified.

I am concerned that the FSS does not adequately direct agencies toward companies with the highest e-waste recycling standards. I am also concerned that there may be a lack of direct oversight of e-waste recycling to ensure proper waste handling. To aid the Committee in its investigation of this matter, please provide in writing answers to the following questions:

1. What were the criteria used to determine which waste recyclers were included as part of Schedule 899-5?
2. Does GSA perform additional audits or reviews of the contractors on its schedule to ensure that they engage in industry best practices? If so, please describe.
3. Does GSA plan to either update or issue new guidance encouraging agencies to use e-waste recyclers who have been certified through one of the voluntary certification processes?

The Committee on Oversight and Government Reform is the principal oversight committee in the U.S. House of Representatives, with jurisdiction over “any matter.” Please deliver the requested information to the Committee on Oversight and Government Reform, room 2157 Rayburn House Office Building no later than 4:00 p.m. on Tuesday, May 18, 2010.

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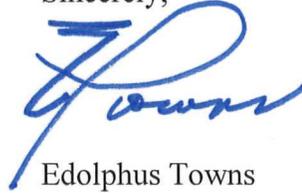
<sup>4</sup> “Exporting Harm: The High-Tech Trashing of Asia,” Basel Action Network and Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition, p.6 (February 25, 2002) (<http://www.ban.org/E-waste/technotrashfinalcomp.pdf>)

<sup>5</sup> Id.

Honorable Martha N. Johnson  
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Should you have any questions about this request, please contact Neema Singh Guliani of the Committee staff at (202) 225-5051.

Sincerely,



Edolphus Towns  
Chairman

cc: The Honorable Darrell Issa  
Ranking Member  
Committee on Oversight and Government Reform