



## BUSINESS

### Carrollton firm recycles PCs

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By VICTOR GODINEZ / The Dallas Morning News

Intechra Inc. wants to give your deceased electronic gadgets a dignified, cheap and, above all, safe burial.

The company's Carrollton facility is part of a growing movement to prevent millions of tons of defunct electronic equipment from quietly leaking toxic chemicals into landfills around the world.

But what actually happens when you dispatch your aging Pentium PC to the big recycling plant in the sky?

A tour of the Carrollton plant illustrates how electronics recycling has become an industry unto itself.

"There are over 100 million computers that are discarded each year, and we actually plan to get a big part of that here at Intechra," said Tim Bowerman, who oversees the Carrollton facility as western region director of operations.

Of course, environmentalism alone isn't a business model.

Mr. Bowerman said that data security is just as important to many customers.

What that really means is data destruction.

When companies or people send in old PCs or PDAs, they want to be sure that all the data on the hard drives and other memory devices are thoroughly destroyed and inaccessible

So while scores of workers inspect monitors, remove motherboards and sort power adapters, other employees spend their time obliterating old data.

On machines that are being refurbished for a second incarnation, the hard drives are wiped with special software that renders the old code unreadable.

Unusable drives suffer a more brutal fate.

A giant press quickly punches quarter-size holes into the drives, as a worker swaps another one in every few seconds.

"The majority of the clients have two major issues, either data security issues or obviously the recycling part," Mr. Bowerman said.

The company also offers a service for people who just don't know what to do with that old machine stored in an attic, basement or closet.



VICTOR GODINEZ/DMN  
Hoang Nguyen repairs computer hard drives at Intechra.

#### Also Online

[Video: See what goes on behind the scenes at Intechra's Carrollton plant](#)

[Link: Organizations that recycle and dispose of used computers and other electronics in Texas](#)

"We have around 20 to 25 people a month that come in here and drop off one or two PCs," Mr. Bowerman said. "It's estimated that 72 percent of the population has at least two ... [pieces of obsolete electronic equipment] in their house, and they don't know what to do with it."

Individuals can drop off most items at no charge at the Carrollton facility.

One among many

Intechra may be one of the biggest standalone computer and electronics recycling firms in the country, but it definitely isn't the only such outfit.

Many computer makers offer their own programs, and dozens of other firms offer recycling services.

The Texas Commission on Environmental Quality has a seven-page list on its Web site of e-recycling facilities in the state, government and nonprofit groups that accept computer donations and other ways to dispose of old machines without consigning them to the landfill.

So far, though, the vast majority of old electronic devices are ending up in the same landfills where most garbage winds up.

According to the commission, about 1.5 million computers are discarded in Texas every year, but only about 162,000 are recycled.

The other 1.3 million are either stored somewhere or sent to landfills.

The Environmental Protection Agency noted in a report earlier this year that, in 2005, about 304 million electronic devices – TVs, computers, cellphones, VCRs, and so forth – were removed from U.S. households.

That's about 1.9 million to 2.2 million tons of material. Of that, the EPA said, 1.5 million to 1.9 million tons ended up in landfills, with only about 345,000 to 379,000 tons recycled.

"Recycling end-of-life (EOL) electronics, rather than disposing of them, makes use of valuable components and materials, thereby conserving natural resources and saving energy," the EPA report said.

Mr. Bowerman said recycling also removes a major toxic hazard. He noted that many of those electronic landfills are in Third World countries, where children are often dispatched to tear open the machines and remove valuable metals and components.

"We have zero tolerance on product going into landfills," he said. "We have an environmental director that actually goes to anywhere that we actually send product to and makes sure that the final destination is getting rid of the product in a safe manner for e-waste recycling."

Retooling

A lot of the gear Intechra processes doesn't need to be discarded.

Many companies upgrade their old computers for newer machines and need to get rid of their aging but still functional technology.

The Carrollton facility inspects those items – testing CD-ROM drives, network adapters, motherboards and more – and then sells directly to corporate customers, posts the items on eBay or puts them on a shelf at a retail store at the warehouse that's open to the public.

While you won't find the latest and greatest technology at the store, older-model high-definition TVs, computers and other items are available.

Regardless of their destination, the goal is to keep those gadgets and peripherals from being buried in the ground.

"Not an ounce of product that comes into an Intechra facility actually goes into a landfill," Mr. Bowerman said.