2 PC Makers Given Credit and Blame in Recycling

By JOHN MARKOFF

SAN FRANCISCO, June 26 — The nation's two largest personal computer makers, Dell and Hewlett-Packard, handle recycling of the waste from computer products in remarkably different ways, according to a report by environmentalists released today.

The report was prepared by the Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition, a group that also focuses on health issues, and the Computer Take Back Campaign. It commended Hewlett-Packard for using "state of the art" practices in partnership with an expanding commercial recycling industry, while criticizing Dell for using low-cost prison labor in association with Unicor, an industrial prison system within the Justice Department.

The report was issued on the second day of a series of meetings now being held by the Environmental Protection Agency in an effort to set standards for recycling consumer electronics and computer technology parts.

Until last year, most electronic waste, from products like television sets and computers, had either gone directly into landfills or been shipped to Asian countries, including China, India and Pakistan, for recycling.

The environmental organizations said that the extensive use of the prison system by Dell and others is a significant obstacle to the creation on a profitable recycling industry. "Our interest is in building a high-quality recycling infrastructure in the United States," said Ted Smith, executive director of the Silicon Valley Toxics Coalition. "There are two obstacles to that: one is the export industry, which sends materials to Asia, and the other is the growing reliance on prison labor."

The director of the Federal Bureau of Prisons' program disputed the conclusions of the report and said that seven prison factories handle only about 36 million pounds of the billion pounds of equipment that he estimated are disposed of annually in the United States.

"There are over 500 recyclers in the United States, and we're not a major player by any means," said the director, Lawrence M. Novicky, general manager of the Recycling Business Group for Unicor.

He said that the California Environmental Protection Agency had inspected Unicor's installation in Atwater, Calif., as recently as Monday and found no health violations.

The environmental report commends a nine-year effort by Hewlett-Packard, in partnership with Noranda, a Canadian mining company that supports plants recycling 3.5 million to 4 million pounds of electronic equipment a month in Roseville, Calif., and Nashville.

At the same time, the report — titled "Corporate Strategies for Electronic Recycling: A Tale of Two Systems," and available on the Web at http://www.svtc.org — is sharply critical of Dell's decision to rely significantly on prison labor.

It notes that inmates who work at the prison recycling operation are paid 20 cents to $1.26 an hour and are not protected by the Fair Labor Standards Act.

The authors said they were permitted a tour of a recycling operation at the Atwater prison, but prison officials would not...
allow a California state health and safety expert to take part. They also said they were not permitted to speak with prisoners. Only after four months of complaints, the authors said, did Unicor agree to allow the state to inspect the installation.

The report criticized Unicor's "primitive" practice of manually smashing leaded monitors, which it said exposed workers to toxic chemicals as well as potential injuries.

It cited a letter from an Atwater prisoner, who wrote: "Even when I wear the paper mask, I blow out black mucus from my nose every day. The black particles in my nose and throat look as if I am a heavy smoker. Cuts and abrasions happen all the time. Of these the open wounds are exposed to the dirt and dust and many do not heal as quickly as normal wounds."

Dell Computer disputed the accusations in the report, saying that the recycling operations met environmental standards and that the prison population benefited from them. "Our goal is keeping all of our recycling offers as low cost as possible," a spokesman, Bryant Hilton, said. "Unicor is part of the answer."

He added that the work program was voluntary, not forced, and that inmates who took part in it had a 24 percent lower recidivism rate than the rest of the prison population.

Dell officials also disputed the contention that the prison labor recycling effort undercut the formation of an American recycling industry. "There is currently not enough capacity for electronics recycling in the United States," Mr. Hilton said. "Unicor is not driving anyone out of business."

Both Hewlett-Packard and Dell have been increasing options for consumers to return old computers as well as using the programs for marketing purposes. Hewlett began a program last year, agreeing to pick up computers at a home or place of business, and Dell started a similar program in March.