

Byproduct backlash

Millions of discarded mobile handsets now litter U.S. landfills. GRC Wireless Recycling has a plan to transform that trash into treasure.

According to the Cellular Telecommunications and Internet Association, more than 80 million wireless phones are sold each year, with the average consumer updating his or her device every 18 months. The byproduct of this new-newer-newest culture is that piles of yesterday's wireless devices are abandoned in closets and drawers—or worse, they end up in landfills, leaching potentially harmful chemicals into the soil and groundwater.

Enter the wireless phone recycler. Several companies have entered the business of recycling, turning consumer and industry discards into profit, reducing environmental waste and even helping out nonprofit social service agencies in the process. GRC Wireless Recycling is one: The Miramar, Fla., company is in the business of collecting old phones and reselling them to carriers in Third World countries or else destroying them after first extracting the valuable metals and materials.

GRC CEO Henry Garcia estimates there are about 150 million used phones lying around consumers' homes alone. "The way we see recycling is a combination of recovery—reclaiming the electronic waste out there and reusing it," Garcia said. "The third aspect of it is destruction. That's when you actually crush up and shred all of this product and extract the gold and the palladium. Those are valuable minerals that can be extracted, and you're also reusing the lead and those other things that can do harm to the environment."

Through its Shelter Alliance program, GRC works with social service agencies such as the YWCA and the Salvation Army to hold drives in communities to collect phones, paying the agencies from \$1 to \$30 per device depending on future resale value. So far, more than 1200 organizations have enrolled, with a return of \$1.2 million back to the participating groups. Garcia said about 70% of the phones collected through this program are resold.

"Every phone has a value, whether it's reused or destroyed," Garcia said. "If we can get the phones soon enough that they're marketable, then the social service organization will receive compensation depending upon the marketability of that product. It's a win-win situation for the social service organizations. They can't sell these phones, but they have value if they're placed in certain markets or with certain carriers."

GRC's second avenue for recovery is through its Wireless Industry Recycling program, which collects phones from dealers,



manufacturers, repair centers and distributors, paying \$1 per pound of material collected. Because most of this material is scrap, 97% is destroyed.

"The interesting thing is electronic recycling as a whole. Most people think of computers, and when you think of recycling computers, the cost element is very high and people shy away from it. We are coming out and saying cellular phones are different from computers. There is enough money to be made in the recycling of cellular that we are able to pay at least a dollar per pound. The gold and palladium give us enough revenue." In other words, there really is gold in them thar hills of discarded devices. —STEPHANIE DELL