

# Sustainability — yes we can

## Get aggressive against e-waste

On March 31 we celebrate the birthday of the late Cesar Chavez, labor leader and founder of the



Cesar Chavez

United Farm Workers of America. Chavez fought for social justice: fairer wages, safer working conditions

and the right to organize. But he was also an environmentalist, knowing that the health of the planet and the well-being of people are inseparable.

During a 1984 grape boycott, Chavez protested the use of certain toxic pesticides, exposing the hazards these chemicals posed to vineyard workers and to the environment. Alarmed by these issues, the public supported the boycott and refused to buy grapes. This had the effect of building enough pressure on growers for them to agree to pesticide restrictions, along with other demands by the UFW.

### The 'environment' means us

Although the word wasn't being used yet, what Chavez and the UFW were talking about back then was really sustainability. Sustainability recognizes that the environment affects people and vice versa. After all, we're all part of the same natural system. Their big victory was to persuade the agricultural industry to make its decisions based on the social and environmental impacts of its actions, as well as on profit. Today, 15 years after Chavez's death, social and environmental responsibility is no longer a novel concept to companies, and taking people and the planet into account is just good business.

### Problem creates opportunity

Something similar to the anti-pesticide movement is happening today with electronics recycling. Obsolete computers, monitors, TVs and other electronics containing toxic ingredients were banned from landfills in 2001. However, local electronics recyclers couldn't handle the flood of e-waste that the ban caused.

As a result, about 80 percent of e-waste collected for recycling back in 2003 was shipped overseas — mostly to China. There the computers were dismantled under terrible social



and environmental conditions.

Public outcry paved the way for new legislation in 2005, requiring California manufacturers to collect a recycling fee when certain electronics were sold. This fee was earmarked to pay for safe recycling of the products at the end of their useful lives. The law also put restrictions on export of e-waste to the developing world.

By no means are all of California's e-waste recycling issues resolved. But our state's approach of addressing the social as well as environmental problems has not only cut down on the mishandling of toxic waste, but also prevented an untold number of people from being poisoned by our electronic discards.

### Green-collar jobs

Today the electronics recycling industry is an example of a "green-collar" economy, one that actually creates jobs that help improve environmental quality. (Did you know, for example, that the recycling industry sustains 10 times more jobs than landfilling and incineration?)

Green-collar jobs range from such familiar occupations as recycling, repair and reuse, to solar panel installation, organic farming and green building.

This month, as we commemorate Chavez's achievements in social and environmental justice, let's take his vision further.

Let's imagine an economy that not only reduces damage to the environment and minimizes human suffering (aiming only for "less bad" in other words), but one that actually *helps* our communities thrive. Let's support companies that work to protect the planet and to create opportunities for people at the same time.

Let's honor Chavez by being mindful of our resources and reducing, reusing and recycling.

*Si se puede!*

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