

A Warning For Those Recycling Electronics

A boat filled with illegally dumped and potentially dangerous computer equipment is pulled from the bottom of a Minnesota lake. How it got there is only half the mystery.

Contractors for the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency empty computers and monitors from a boat pulled last October from Rice Lake, about 80 miles northwest of the Twin Cities. The boat was sunk to illegally dump discarded Hamline University equipment. (KIT GRAYSON, Minnesota Pollution Control Agency) In spring 2006, computer monitors began bobbing to the surface of Stearns County's Rice Lake and washing ashore. By that fall, authorities had identified the problem: a boatload of personal computers, printers, monitors and other equipment resting in 20 feet of murky water. Now, almost a year after the boat filled with discarded Hamline University equipment was pulled from the lake, Minnesota officials are trying to figure out who dumped it there and why. "It was intentional, and it was criminal," said Jeff Connell, manager of compliance and enforcement for the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency. "It was the most egregious example (of dumping unused computers) I've seen, considering where they put them." In all, 64 computer units were traced to the lake. Each contained metals and hazardous pollutants such as lead, cadmium and mercury. "It would take a long time for these materials to leach out of where they are, but left there long enough, that would happen," said Connell. He said the heavy metals eventually would have found their way into the food chain. Panfish, walleye and northern pike are just some of the fish in Rice Lake. All of the equipment came from St. Paul's Hamline University. Officials with the university said they thought they had disposed of it properly by turning the equipment over to a recycling contractor in the early 1990s. "The first we heard of them was when the PCA said they found them on the bottom of the lake," said Dan Loritz, Hamline's vice president for university relations. "That was a surprise to us." The school, he said, has given the MPCA the name of the contractor so the agency can determine why the equipment, which still had Hamline stickers on it, wasn't recycled as intended. The name of the contractor was not available Thursday. With the registration number on the boat still visible, Connell said, authorities are focusing on some suspects. "We have people of interest," Connell said. "Do we have people we're circling in on? Yes, we do." But that's not the only puzzle. Authorities also are looking for another boat filled with old computer equipment. It seems that about the time the five monitors floated to the surface, a lakeside resident took several photographs of a computer-filled boat parked on a trailer near the lake. When the sunken boat was finally located last year, investigators thought they'd gotten everything. Not quite. "The boat on the trailer and at the bottom of the bay - they are not the same," Connell said. "It has since disappeared. ... We certainly searched the whole bay of Rice Lake, and it's not there." The company that found the first boat agreed. "The photographs show what appears to be an aluminum hull vessel with wire bed frames securing computer monitors," said a letter from Cliff Schmidt, of Schmidt Marine Specialties. "The vessel recovered was a fiberglass hull with wider sides than in the earlier photographs." Connell said authorities don't know whether the boat and computers were sunk elsewhere in the lake, taken to another lake and scuttled, or simply hauled somewhere else. "We need to find the person responsible to find the boat," he said. Based on the contents found so far, Loritz said he doesn't believe all of the equipment Hamline got rid of in the early 1990s has been recovered. Authorities said they are relatively certain the dumping took place in spring 2006, at least a dozen years after Hamline got rid of the equipment. "They weren't down there very long," Connell said. "And there is no indication there was a release of any of the metals in the monitors." If the monitors hadn't floated, Connell said, they probably would have remained in the lake for a long time. "It's unlikely they would have been discovered," he said. When the MPCA learned about the computers, it stayed in touch with Hamline. The school hired a consultant to find out what could have happened. Meanwhile, the search for the source continued. On Sept. 29, 2006, Schmidt Marine used a side-scanning sonar to locate the boat and then marked the spot. Almost a month later, on Oct. 26, it used lift bags to raise the hull, which contractors for the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency use flotation devices to raise a boat filled with computer hardware from the bottom of Rice Lake in Stearns County in November. The equipment was once owned by St. Paul's Hamline University, which had given it to a recycling contractor in the early 1990s. The university reimbursed the MPCA \$32,500 after the agency had the hardware hauled away and recycled. (KIT GRAYSON, Minnesota Pollution Control Agency) was still loaded down with equipment. The contents were hauled away. (Emphasis added by A greenSpan) Saying that relinquishing control of hazardous waste electronics violates state law, the MPCA argued Hamline was still responsible for the equipment. Hamline paid to have the computers hauled away and recycled, and has since reimbursed the MPCA \$32,500 for its expenses. "We're responsible for helping make this right," Loritz said. Kay Hanson, a lake resident and former president of the Rice Lake Association, praised the school for acting quickly. "Hamline really took the lead on this and we owe them a debt of gratitude," said Hanson, adding that she's glad the investigation is finally becoming public. "It's just so hard to know that this has all happened," Hanson said. 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