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Recycling rip-off aids N. Korea

The Asahi Shimbun

Once again, it's consumers who end up paying the price.

Thousands of used TVs, refrigerators and washing machines that should have been scrapped for recycling by manufacturers ended up in North Korea after being sold through black market channels, sources say.

They said Tokyo-based retailers Biccamera Co. and Yodobashi Camera Co. commissioned a transport company based in Fukuoka Prefecture to handle the transport of recycled items.

Instead, the company, which received 1,500 yen per item in transportation fees, passed them on to an export company, which was paid 200 yen for each appliance.

The export company then removed seals designating items for recycling and resold them. The Environment Ministry, investigating a suspected violation of the recycling law, said diversion amounted to "an act of betrayal that undermines the trust of consumers."

In this case, consumers had already paid disposal fees as required by the 2001 Electric Appliance Recycling Law.

At least 2,500 appliances were exported, mostly to North Korea, the sources said.

After the appliances were handed to the export company, they were shipped on a freighter allegedly used to transport stolen vehicles to North Korea.

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Manufacturers are obliged to recycle used TVs, refrigerators, washing machines and air conditioners. Retailers collect the used appliances and commission transport companies to return the items to manufacturers.

Consumers pay a recycling fee of between 2,400 yen and 4,600 yen for each item picked up by retailers. Retailers use the fee to pay transportation and recycling costs, which are later claimed by manufacturers.

Biccamera and Yodobashi Camera said they did not become aware of the diversion until December or January.

They said they were prepared to return the fees to consumers. The bulk of the money is still deposited with them since the used appliances never reached the makers. Thus, the makers in many cases did not send recycling bills to the retailers.

According to the sources, the two retailers commissioned a transport company in Dazaifu, Fukuoka Prefecture, to deliver used appliances collected by their outlets in the prefecture to the respective manufacturers.

The retailers paid about 1,500 yen per unit in transportation fees. Instead of taking the appliances to designated recycling sites, the transport company handed them to a Fukuoka-based exporter and paid 200 yen per unit in ``gasoline fees."

The export company did not have a license to transport appliances destined for recycling. Subcontracted transportation in the recycling process is not allowed.

The export company then sorted through the appliances into ones still usable and those that weren't. Appliances that still worked were sold abroad through a trading firm after the recycling seals were removed. Appliances that didn't work ended up at recycling sites under the name of the transport company, the sources said.

The president of the trading company that owns the freighter was recently indicted on charges of buying stolen vehicles for export to North Korea.

An official of the export company told The Asahi Shimbun it shipped

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cargoes at the request of the trading firm president. Shipments were made about twice a month.

The trading company paid the exporter between 1,400 and 2,500 yen for each usable refrigerator. Used washing machines and TVs went for 500 yen apiece.

About 2,000 appliances were diverted by the transport company each month and about 70 percent ended up overseas. The items were declared at local customs, the company said.

Transport company officials declined to comment on the matter.(IHT/Asahi: February 13,2004) (02/13)

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