



Left: Thomas Papageorgiou of Anamet SA; Omar Al-Sharif of Sharif Metals; Josephita Harry of Pan American Zinc LLC; Steve Wong of Fukutomi Recycling Ltd.; Alexandre Torneberg of Torec AB; and Adina Renée Adler of ISRI.

BIR 2019: A few choice words

Recyclers of electronic scrap remain burdened with descriptors such as “e-waste” and “foreign garbage.”

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A panel discussion held by the E-Scrap Committee of the Brussels-based [Bureau of International Recycling \(BIR\)](#) at its 2019 World Recycling Convention in May in Singapore zeroed in on both words and actions that are causing harm to the recycling sector’s reputation.

BIR E-Scrap Committee Chairman Thomas Papageorgiou, of Greece-based [Anamet SA](#), asked fellow panelists and assembled delegates what type of future they saw for electronic scrap recycling, and many of the responses referred to regulations that treat obsolete computers and phones as waste or even hazardous waste.

“Free and fair trade is not free from regulation,” cautioned Adina Renée Adler of the Washington-based [Institute of Scrap Recycling Industries \(ISRI\)](#). Regulations enforced by governments or created by the Basel Convention allow “the market to determine how to move materials,” she added.

Adler said the BIR and ISRI have been part of a 10-year effort “trying to help influence” what the Basel Convention and other UN-affiliated agencies consider to be waste versus non-waste. In terms of electronic scrap, an effort to carve out a non-waste exemption for reusable electronic items failed “because of perceptions a company could illegally dump [non-working items] in the guise of reuse.”

The battle to classify obsolete electronics as scrap instead of waste may have been lost when critics of the cross-border e-scrap trade succeeded in having the material referred to as e-waste by the world’s regulatory bodies, according to some delegates.

The Basel Convention ruling is “not a surprise” because “even we can’t stop calling it a waste,” said Doug Kramer of United States-based [Kramer Metals](#) to the assembled delegates. Kramer, a former ISRI president, added, “Our industry has to talk about this material as a commodity. You don’t deal in waste.”

Salam Sharif of United Arab Emirates-based [Sharif Metals](#) commented that “the word e-waste should be banned” rather than the trading of such materials. He added, however, that “a low bar had been set” regarding quality and regulations during the years when China and other nations were in hot pursuit of secondary raw materials in any form.

Steve Wong of Hong Kong-based [Fukutomi Recycling Ltd.](#) said the Chinese government has been a leader in labeling recyclable materials “foreign garbage,” much to the detriment of the overall recycling industry. He said the ABS, polypropylene (PP), polystyrene (PS) and other types of plastic scrap harvested from discarded electronics “can be recycled cost-effectively.” Added Wong, “Recycling properly is good for the environment, but recycling improperly can be bad for it.”

Fons Krist, who works from Singapore for Germany-based [Aurubis](#), said recyclers must be vigilant to protect their own reputations, as bad behavior persists in the market. In the electronics recycling sector there are “certified good players” still getting caught sending e-scrap from developed nations to developing ones, in violation of both the Basel Convention and their own certification protocol, he commented.

Adler said recyclers and their trade associations may also need to study and address the “falsifying of documents” that some exporters and importers undertake to avoid paying higher taxes and customs fees. “That activity is making it harder for our members to legitimately trade,” she stated.

Handling obsolete electronics will only grow as a task for the global recycling industry, as spelled out in a market report prepared by Surendra Borad Patawari of Belgium-based [Gemini Corp.](#) The recycler and trader says India is joining the ranks of nations producing growing streams of obsolete electronics. He writes, “India is likely to generate 5.2 million metric tons of [e-scrap] per year by 2020, up from 2 million metric tons in 2016.”

The 2019 BIR World Recycling Convention & Exhibition was held May 19-22 at the Shangri-La Hotel in Singapore.