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ANDREW REVKIN

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A U.S. Battery Recycler Says We Should Keep the Lead In

By **ANDREW C. REVKIN**

Building on a [recent guest post](#) describing how exports of old car batteries from the United States are creating a toxic trail in poorer nations, here's a "Your Dot" contribution from Robert E. Finn, the president of RSR Corporation, a company that smelts recycled lead here at home. Finn focuses on the need to improve the environmental performance of his industry. (Decades ago, [emissions from an RSR smelter in West Dallas, Tex., ended up producing a Superfund toxic site](#); these days the company has been [pushing regulators to toughen environmental standards](#).) But he also calls for changes in policies that help sustain the flow of old lead batteries to other countries where any oversight of the industry is minimal, at best:

As the president of a [company](#) operating three secondary lead smelters in the United States, I have the responsibility of ensuring that the work we do does not harm the people we employ and the communities in which we work. Simply meeting current pollution standards isn't enough, and our industry must do more. We bear a [moral obligation](#) to implement controls and standards that reflect the best available air pollution control technologies.

While RSR Corporation has moved forward to install [wet electrostatic precipitators](#) to cut 95 percent of our lead, arsenic and cadmium emissions, many other secondary lead smelters in this country continue to use pollution control equipment that was considered state of the art three decades ago. This must change. The Environmental Protection Agency must enact stronger [maximum achievable control technology](#) requirements and the battery recycling industry must show leadership in making sustainability a core part of its business model moving forward.

One way for our industry to show it is serious about sustainability is to voice strong opposition to the practice of exporting spent lead batteries to developing countries for recycling. While Richard Fuller's [recent Dot Earth piece](#) described the global problem, it's worth digging deeper on the flow of American car batteries to Mexico.

In a recent report, the [Commission for Environmental Cooperation](#), an

environmental working group chartered under the [North American Free Trade Agreement](#), found that no Mexican recycler had practices clean enough to receive the necessary air, water and waste permits needed to operate in the United States. The nonprofit groups [Occupational Knowledge International](#) and [Fronteras Comunes](#) found that even the best Mexican recyclers have emissions some 20 times higher than their American counterparts. Their employees have blood lead levels that are five times higher than those in workers here. The New York Times's own [Elisabeth Rosenthal](#) has reported on the danger recycling poses to Mexican communities. Yet we still export close to 340,000 metric tons of lead batteries to Mexico every year.

American recyclers have the capacity to handle old batteries here at home. An out of sight, out of mind mentality is not the way to handle the hazardous waste we generate.

Exporting these batteries to be processed under grossly inadequate environmental and workplace safety regulations is an abdication by industry of its responsibility to be a good steward of the environment and America's responsibility to be a good trade partner with Mexico.