

# The Greening of PCs and Food Packaging

From the Editors of E/The Environmental Magazine

**Dear EarthTalk:** As an online gamer, I spend a lot of time in front of my computer. What's the environmental impact? And are "greener" PCs available?

— Bob Grant, Burlington, VT

Online gamers and other heavy computer users are definitely leaving an environmental mark. Depending on when it was made and how it was designed, a standard desktop PC can use anywhere from 60 to 300 watts when in use, while an inefficient gaming PC with powerful graphics card, multiple hard drives and optical drives, flash memory reader and a 30-inch LCD might consume as much as 750 watts, or about as much as a typical refrigerator. Until July of 2007, government Energy Star requirements only measured a computer's energy use while in standby mode, which allowed the majority of brands to carry the label.

New stricter efficiency requirements have brought greener models. You'll find the largest selection from companies like Dell and Hewlett Packard. Many businesses use the Electronic Products Environmental Assessment Tool (EPEAT) to assist in the purchase of greener computing systems, and the evaluations can be useful to consumers, too. EPEAT evaluates and rates computing equipment on 28 efficiency and sustainability criteria, awarding them bronze, silver, or gold for overall performance.

Technology company VIA is well regarded as an industry leader in low-wattage processors (central processing units or CPUs), with some barely sipping only a dozen or so watts from the power supply. Some typical VIA designs can outperform competitors using only 23 watts, or less than half the power called for by Energy Star specifications. Of course graphics cards used by PC gamers are serious energy hogs. Your top-end ATI or nVidia card will render great graphics, but use 300 watts or more. Newer cards are better, but much depends on their use. The best advice is to buy only the graphics power you need.

One of the easiest ways to save on computer power is to use technology that automatically rests when you do and to shut your computer down when you're not using it. Windows XP allows users to configure power management settings, and Vista Ulti-

mate lets you configure power-saving options in even more ways. Vista can actually throttle its power consumption for some tasks and power down at other times. If you're just typing a Microsoft Word document, performance will back down, whereas if you are editing video in a powerful program like Adobe Premier Pro, Vista will use all of the processing power available.

Bear in mind that screen savers are not energy savers. In fact, power-down features may not work if you have a screen saver activated. Happily, LCD color monitors do not need screen savers. In terms of shutting down, while PCs use a small amount of energy when they start up, it's considerably less than the energy used when they are on for long periods of time. Consider turning off the monitor if you aren't going to use your PC for more than 20 minutes and both the CPU and monitor if you're not going to use your PC for more than two hours.

If you're concerned about the "wear and tear" of turning PCs on and off, don't be. Most PCs reach the end of their "useful" life due to advances in technology long before the effects of being switched on and off multiple times can have a negative impact on their service life.

For more information, visit Energy Star at [www.energystar.gov](http://www.energystar.gov); EPEAT at [epeat.net](http://epeat.net); [www.epa.gov/epaoswer/hazwaste/recycle/ecycling/donate.htm](http://www.epa.gov/epaoswer/hazwaste/recycle/ecycling/donate.htm) for information on recycling an old monitor; and VIA at [www.via.com](http://www.via.com).

**Dear EarthTalk:** Everybody says to stop using plastic bags, but what about all the plastic, cellophane, cardboard, and other materials used for packaging the food itself? What can we do to reduce how much of this unnecessary stuff comes wrapped around our food?

— Sunil Sreedharan, Mumbai, India

Yes, food packaging is a big problem in North America as well as elsewhere around



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the world, with landfills filling up and recyclers facing a glut of materials to process. It's hard to say just how much of the 130 million tons of paper, plastic, and metals that get tossed or sorted for recycling in major U.S. cities is from food packaging, but the percentage is no doubt sizable. The main problem is in the psychology of marketing: Manufacturers know that products in big flashy-looking packages attract more buyers.

A 1994 European Union directive requires companies operating in its 27 member nations to take back and recycle (or otherwise deal with, taking the burden off of local communities) at least 60 percent of their packaging waste, including that used for food items. But no such "producer pays" laws, which provide incentive for manufacturers to cut back on waste to begin with, exist in the United States or Canada. As such, it falls to consumers to patronize stores and manufacturers that minimize packaging.

One way to take a bite out of packaging is to buy as much in bulk as your family can keep up with. It may take longer to get through that gigantic box of cereal you got at Costco, but think of all the cardboard and plastic your bulk purchase saved over buying several small boxes. Similarly, instead of sending the kids off to school every day with a new juice box in the lunch bag, how about a safe metal or plastic reusable, washable container that you can refill each morning from the gallon jug you keep in the fridge?

Another way to forego packaging is to reduce time spent in large supermarkets, where wasteful product packaging rules. Most natural foods stores have large bulk-

buying sections so you can haul away in large paper or plastic bags the equivalent of many containers of beans, pastas, rice, or other staples. Frequenting local farmers' markets—armed with your reusable shopping tote, of course—is another way to keep food packaging out of your home. [Locally, we of course have our downtown farmer's market in addition to a Siesta Key market, Lakewood Ranch market, Green Door Organics co-op, and Sarasota Farms Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) program.]

It's worth noting that we tend to toss way too much food packaging where a quick rinse would make the same cans, jars, and jugs useful storage containers or quality recycling fodder. Soup cans, for example, can easily be recycled into new steel and are collected universally by municipal recycling programs. And while you're buying soup, opt for the family-size cans and save leftovers instead of buying single-serving containers. Even when packaging material is recyclable, there's no reason to waste it, as even recycling uses resources and costs money.

Beyond shopping and sorting more responsibly, individuals also have the power of their voices to pressure food makers to cut back on packaging. You can also try to persuade your elected officials to look into the feasibility of enacting "producer pays" laws in your community, city, or state. And you can talk to co-workers, friends, relatives, and others about the importance of buying in bulk and reducing waste.

For more information on the European Union Packaging and Packaging Waste Directive, visit [europa.eu/scadplus/leg/en/lvb/l21207.htm](http://europa.eu/scadplus/leg/en/lvb/l21207.htm); also visit Local Harvest at [www.localharvest.org](http://www.localharvest.org).

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