



Europe breaking electronic waste export ban

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Old televisions and computers containing hazardous substances are still being exported from Europe despite a ban aimed at stopping the trade, which poisons workers at makeshift recycling plants in Africa and Asia.

In Rotterdam a Dutch customs officer swings open a heavy metal door to reveal a pile of old televisions stacked tight within a shipping container.

Instead of proceeding to Ivory Coast, these goods will be impounded, checked and most likely sent back to Germany, from where they arrived.

This is the front line of the European effort to stop electronic and electrical equipment, consumed and discarded in ever greater quantities, from being dumped in the developing world.

A customs official at Rotterdam port opens a container filled with suspected e-waste

It is a daunting task.

Rotterdam is Europe's busiest port, a hub for regional shipping. More than nine million six-meter (20ft) containers or their equivalent pass through each year.

Just one-third of those carrying goods for export are from the Netherlands, with most coming from the EU's other 26 states, including the UK and southern Europe.

Customs officials select suspect shipments through risk profiling, sorting through a list of indicators including the container's sender and its destination.

'One step behind'

But even though the Dutch have led the way in cracking down on illegal e-waste exports - the European Union banned the trade in the mid-1990s - only 3% or so of the containers in

Rotterdam are checked. In an average week one shipment may be caught, which could mean several containers holding 800 monitors each.

An unknown number of containers slip through, or are directed to European ports with fewer controls.

"Risk profiles are always based on what happened before and you're actually often one step behind," says Carl Huijbregts of the Dutch environment ministry's inspectorate.

Because this is an illicit trade, there is little data on its scale. But interceptions in Europe and anecdotal evidence from destination states suggest it is flourishing.

"We have an extraordinary amount of illegal shipment along the coast in Europe", says Karl-Heinz Florenz, a German member of the European Parliament who is working to update EU law.

Traffickers trick the authorities by not labeling goods as electronics, by pretending they are for re-use, or by hiding them in the middle of a container.

The containers that get through are shipped to West Africa - most commonly Ghana and Nigeria - and to South Asian countries including India and Pakistan.

"The fundamental problem with electronics is that it's designed in a very bad way," says Kim Schoppink, a campaigner at the Dutch branch of Greenpeace who travelled to Ghana to look at the issue in 2008.

"That makes it very expensive to recycle in Europe and therefore it's dumped in developing countries."

The e-waste contains valuable metals, which are extracted at informal recycling sites.

But it also contains toxic heavy metals and hazardous chemicals that are handled by workers, some of them children.

"They take some copper and aluminum and the rest they burn," says Ms Schoppink.

"With this burning process a lot of toxic chemicals are released and these workers are exposed to that every day."

Concerns about industrial dumping in the developing world led to the 1989 Basel Convention on international movements of hazardous waste.

In 1994 the European Community adopted the convention, which bans the export of hazardous waste to anywhere outside the OECD grouping of mostly developed countries.

It is meant to complement EU rules encouraging the collection and recycling of e-waste within Europe according to fixed environmental standards.

But by the EU's own admission, its rules are only partially effective. Just one-third of e-waste is thought to be treated in line with the bloc's [Waste Electrical and Electronic Equipment \(WEEE\)](#) directive.

'Fundamental issue'

The rest enters a "hidden flow" fed by offices, municipal waste collection points, and shops that take back goods under guarantee, and part of that flow is illegally exported.

"It really has become the crisis issue of the whole [Basel Convention](#)," says Jim Puckett of the Basel Action Network, pointing to the e-waste generated as people buy flat-screen TVs and switch to digital. "It is really the fundamental, number one issue."

He says the US, which has not ratified the Basel Convention, is "way behind" Europe on e-waste, and estimates that as much as 80% of American e-waste is exported, much of it to China through the port of Hong Kong.

In Europe, some countries have a better record than others in applying the directive and trying to stop illegal exports, with southern EU states lagging behind.

But even where officials try to enforce the rules, there are challenges. These include distinguishing between second-hand goods - which are legal to export - and e-waste, and the fact that collection and recycling targets are out of line with the growing amount of electronics generated.

"We have 27 European member states but there are more than 100 collection systems and every system has another weak spot," says Mr Huijbregts.

There are plenty of opportunities for the brokers involved in illegal e-waste trafficking to siphon off e-waste.

"You don't need a truck, you don't need a crane, you don't need a digger," says Mr Florenz. "You only need an office, some connections, and you have to know the regulations and the border and customs."

A look inside Sims Recycling Solutions in Eindhoven

Alongside environmental damage in the developing world, Mr Florenz has an additional concern - that Europe is buying then losing large quantities of increasingly scarce raw materials contained in e-waste.

And the more these materials fall into the hands of illegal brokers, the tougher it is for companies like Sims Recycling Solutions, which processes much of the e-waste generated in the Netherlands.

There have been e-waste prosecutions in EU states, including the Netherlands and the UK. But observers are worried that they have not produced the kind of penalties that could serve as a deterrent.

"In some countries it can be 200 euros (\$260; £165) which, if you look to the profits that they make, is nothing," says Nancy Isarin, an expert on waste shipment with the European environmental network Impel.

"Other countries might have higher fines, but they are never actually implemented."

Beyond tightening controls within the EU, campaigners point to the need to ensure second-hand electronics sent to developing countries for charity are disposed of correctly.

And they flag up broader challenges - getting electronics companies to design greener products and weaning consumers off their electronics habit.

"You have to do everything you can to enforce the laws you have in place and make people pay the costs of what they're doing," says Mr Puckett. "And that ultimately is a really good thing as it drives greener production."

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