

Smuggling Europe's Waste to Poorer Countries

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ROTTERDAM, the Netherlands — When two inspectors swung open the doors of a battered red shipping container here, they confronted a graveyard of Europe's electronic waste — old wires, electricity meters, circuit boards — mixed with remnants of cardboard and plastic.



Michel de Groot for The New York Times

Arno Vink, left, and Harriette Smidt checking containers in the Dutch port of Rotterdam.



Michel de Groot for The New York Times

The Dutch have taken a lead in inspecting for illegal exports of waste, in part by X-raying containers like these in Rotterdam.

“This is supposed to be going to China, but it isn't going anywhere,” said Arno Vink, an inspector from the Dutch environment ministry who impounded the container because of Europe's strict new laws that place restrictions on all types of waste exports, from dirty pipes to broken computers to household trash.

Exporting waste illegally to poor countries has become a vast and growing international business, as companies try to minimize the costs of new environmental laws, like those here, that tax waste or require that it be recycled or otherwise disposed of in an environmentally responsible way.

Rotterdam, the busiest port in Europe, has unwittingly become Europe's main external garbage chute, a gateway for trash bound for places like China, Indonesia, India and Africa. There, electronic waste and construction debris containing toxic chemicals are often dismantled by children at great cost to their health. Other garbage that is supposed to be recycled according to European law may be simply burned or left to rot, polluting air and water and releasing the heat-trapping gases linked to global warming.

While much of the international waste trade is legal, sent to qualified overseas recyclers, a big chunk is not. For a price, underground traders make Europe's waste disappear overseas.

After Europe first mandated recycling electronics like televisions and computers, two to three million tons of electronic waste was turned in last year, far less than the seven million tons anticipated. Much of the rest was probably exported illegally, according to the European Environment Agency.

Paper, plastic and metal trash exported from Europe rose tenfold from 1995 to 2007, the agency says, with 20 million containers of waste now shipped each year either legally or illegally. Half of that passes through this huge port, where trucks and ships exchange goods around the clock.

In the United States, more states are passing laws that require the recycling of goods, especially electronics. But because the United States places fewer restrictions on trash exports and monitors them far less than Europe, that increasing volume is flowing relatively freely overseas, mostly legally, experts say. Up to 100 containers of waste from the United States and Canada arrive each day, according to environmental groups and local authorities in Hong Kong.

“Now we are collecting far more, but they can't prevent it from going offshore. People talk about 'leakage,' but it's really a hemorrhage,” said Jim Puckett, director of the Basel Action Network, a Seattle-based environmental nonprofit that tracks waste exported from the United States.

The temptation to export waste is great because recycling properly at home is expensive: Because of Europe's new environmental laws, it is four times as expensive to incinerate trash in the Netherlands as to put it — illegally — on a boat to China. And the vast container ships that arrive in Europe and North America from Asia filled with cheap garments and

electrical goods now have a profitable return cargo: garbage like steel cables, circuit boards and leftovers from last night's pasta meal.

"The traffic in waste exports has become enormous," said Christian Fischer, chief consultant on waste to the European Environment Agency, which released its first study on the topic this year, "but we need much better information about it."

The Dutch have taken a lonely lead in inspecting waste exports and curbing the traffic, providing a rare window into the trade. They estimate that 16 percent of the exports are illegal. But in most ports where customs inspectors typically check imports far more thoroughly than exports, much probably passes through unnoticed.

In July, a shipment of 1,400 metric tons of British household garbage that was illegally sent to South America — labeled as clean plastic for recycling — was apprehended only after it landed in Brazil.

Rotterdam uses X-rays and computer analysis of shipping documents to pick out suspicious containers. But other countries need to do more, said Albert Klingenberg of the Dutch environment ministry, adding: "When they can't get it out in Rotterdam, they go to Antwerp or Hamburg."

The European Union's laws governing waste disposal require more recycling of paper and plastic each year, and generally prohibit dumping in landfills. Incineration is now heavily taxed in most European countries.

The regulations also prohibit exporting waste to poorer parts of the world unless the receiving country accepts that kind of waste and it is going to a certified recycler. The guidelines fully ban the export of certain hazardous materials and so-called "problematic" waste, defined as waste that is not amenable to recycling and so would be harmful to the environment at its destination, for example, waste that is soggy or mixed household garbage.

The European laws generally follow the guidelines of the 1992 Basel Convention, the treaty that regulates dangerous exports of waste, and a proposed 1998 amendment.

The United States, during the Bush administration, was one of the few countries that did not ratify the convention. And much of the trash trade banned by Europe is still legal in the United States, where laws focus on only the most hazardous waste.

That may change. A State Department official, who insisted on anonymity because the new administration had not formally reviewed its policy, said, "We'll be grappling with that in this administration." Some types of waste exports are environmentally sound, experts say. If products and packaging used in Europe are manufactured in Asia it may make sense to ship them back for recycling. The waste trade, legal and illegal — is partly propelled by the fact that fast-growing economies like China's and India's need the raw material. From Rotterdam, paper, plastic and metals tend to be sent to China. Electronic waste tends to go to African countries, in particular Ghana, Egypt and Nigeria.

But companies in Africa and Asia are "highly variable" in their recycling capabilities, dependability and safety records, said Mr. Fischer, the consultant to the environment agency.

In Rotterdam, inspectors uncover endless ploys to subvert the system: Containers are packed with legal goods in front to hide illegal material. TVs and computers are labeled as secondhand goods, which can be legally shipped, even though they are destined for dismantling.

The inspections office here is filled with plastic bags containing evidence; grease-covered pipes, fluid from toner cartridges and a mix of paper and plastic scraps share space with more traditional trafficking fare like cocaine, weapons and fake Croc clogs.

Despite fines of up to \$22,000, traffickers feel it is worth the risk to send trash abroad, although repeat violations can lead to criminal prosecution.

Last year, the Dutch returned 80 illegal shipments to their countries of origin, their usual policy. But that is not always possible.

In one case, inspectors seized an American container carrying old paint cans and other material to Nigeria. They could not send it back, because the United States is not a party to the Basel Convention. Anyway, the hazardous contents were leaking, and the Dutch were left to dispose of them properly.

This article has been revised to reflect the following correction:

Correction: September 29, 2009: An article on Sunday about illegal shipments of electronic waste from European Union nations to poorer countries misstated both the amount of waste turned in legally last year for recycling within the European Union and the amount it had expected to receive. Two million to three million tons was turned in — not two to three tons — and seven million tons had been anticipated, not seven tons.