

Italy's Eco Mafia

Mafia Are Cashing In On Toxic Dumping and Other Environmental Crimes

BY CHRISTINE MACDONALD

When you think mafia, cocaine trafficking or loan sharking may come to mind. But groups such as Italy's ruthless 'Ndrangheta crime syndicate have expanded activities to include toxic waste handling and natural resources trafficking. Yes, the mafia has "gone green" but not in a good way.

In Italy alone, mafia groups committed more than 30,000 environmental crimes in 2010, according to the Italian environmental group Legambiente. They include trafficking in exotic animals and stolen timber, running illegal slaughterhouses and schemes to redirect water resources. One mafia family even tried to elbow into the wind farm business. But toxic dumping has proved a growth industry despite increased law enforcement scrutiny in recent years.

"It's largely recognized that up to 30% of the total waste generated in Italy may be handled by organized crime—30 million or 40 million metric tons a year," says Roberto Ferrigno, a waste-management consultant and former Greenpeace campaigner.

Since mafia groups allegedly first started dabbling in toxic waste a few decades ago, mafia watchers at Interpol and the U.S. Department of Justice say it's evolved into a globalized business. Besides the human and habitat harm, the illegal waste trafficking feeds corruption and strengthens criminal gangs in countries on both the shipping and receiving ends.

Legambiente estimates that business in illegal toxic waste dumping on Italian farmland and beneath construction buildings totals more than \$26 billion per year. Worldwide, meanwhile, the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime says the illicit commodities trade—including profits from toxic waste dumping and natural resources plunder, as well as trafficking in people, arms and counterfeit goods—is worth an annual \$130 billion. That's more than combined annual cocaine and heroin sales.

At the bustling port of Antwerp in Belgium, where Ferrigno is based, officials acknowledge that they lose track of one in every four cargo containers carrying waste. Even as countries have strengthened their laws against unsafe disposal and stepped up enforcement, mafia groups have consolidated their grip on the industry in Italy and elsewhere—often by acquiring legitimate waste management companies and using ties to local governments to expand further into the trash trade. Recent law enforcement reports conclude that the groups are capitalizing on "synergies" with their more traditional drug, guns and human trafficking operations.

Michele Polo, an economics professor at Milan's Bocconi University, told Reuters last year that Italy's organized criminal groups have also infiltrated the construction, logistics, hospitality, retail and wholesale commerce trades. Illicit trade routes move industrial slag and toxic waste from European factories and hospitals to Africa, where they are illegally dumped. Stolen minerals and timber from the global south, meanwhile, move into Europe, using the infrastructure built for drug trafficking.



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With its long history dealing with organized crime, Italy is grappling with a particularly intractable problem. Mafia activity contributes between 7% and 11% of Italy's gross domestic product, according to researchers. And the current world economic malaise has only accelerated the mafia's expansion. Watchdog groups say "extortionist" lending to struggling private firms has put a mafia stranglehold on entire regions of the country. The Palermo-based anti-crime

group SOS Impresa went so far as to characterize the situation as a national emergency.

"With 65 billion euros in liquidity, the Mafia is Italy's number one bank," the SOS group said in a statement in January that accompanied a new report on the issue.

Once confined to Sicily and other parts of southern Italy, the groups are expanding northward, bringing the standard repertoire of drug trafficking, extortion and murder—plus illicit landfills and other environmental crimes—to regions such as Lombardy.

Last fall, police made dozens of arrests in a Milan suburb where the 'Ndrangheta was charged with illegal dumping at construction sites it controlled. The country's anti-mafia police has charged 'Ndrangheta-controlled contractors with dumping carcinogen-laden waste into construction excavations before building houses, shopping malls and soccer fields on top.

In southern Italy, where the dumping has been going on much longer, concern is growing about the human health impacts. The

country's famous buffalo mozzarella cheese from farmland near Naples tested with high levels of cancer-causing dioxins in 2008.

Meanwhile, Antonio Giordano, president of the Sbarro Institute for Cancer Research at Temple University in Philadelphia, led a team of cancer researchers to Campania. The investigation found higher rates of cancers, cancer deaths and serious birth defects in areas where dumping had occurred. The findings were published in the journal *Cancer Biology & Therapy* last July.

"There is no doubt," Giordano says, that the waste dumped on farmland in the region going back at least to the 1970s is responsible for the higher tumor rates, birth defects and other health problems in a region long known for its fertile pastures and healthy people.

"Suddenly the DNA of the people living there became full of holes, full of damage," he says. It can only be explained by "years and years and years of dumping." Giordano hopes publicity from his research will force Italian officials to finally begin Superfund-style cleanups of known sites. **E**

CHRISTINE MACDONALD is the author of *Green, Inc.: An Environmental Insider Reveals How a Good Cause Has Gone Bad* (The Lyons Press).

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