

EUROPE NEWS

Naples's Garbage Crisis Piles Up on City Outskirts Toxic Bonfires Fuel Mounting Concerns About Contaminated Food and Water

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CONNECT

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NAPLES - A new garbage crisis is exploding on the outskirts of this city long plagued by recurring trash-handling problems - this time fueling toxic bonfires that have burned unchecked and worries about contaminated water and food supplies.



*A demonstrator protested trash-induced safety issues earlier this month.
Agence France-Presse/Getty Images*

While the mountains of rotting trash that made front pages around the world five years ago have largely disappeared from the city's center, the problem has shifted to Naples's impoverished periphery. There, residents say the local mafia burns toxic industrial refuse, including asbestos, unchecked, and piles of trash sit alongside farmland.

"People are just terrified," says Maurizio Patriciello, a priest in one of the most exposed towns in the area. "Central and local governments have underestimated this problem for decades."

Though the area's waste-handling woes are long-standing, the effects on food and water safety have grown more apparent and intensified public outrage. Thousands of demonstrators last month took to Naples's streets to protest the garbage crisis and, last week, Pope Francis also voiced concern. The problem is so serious that officials at the U.S. Navy base outside Naples have moved personnel away from surrounding areas over the past two years after they found contaminated water supplies nearby.

The resurgence of Naples's garbage crisis reflects an entrenched mix of poor local administration, economic decline and mafia influence that has been a blight in much of Italy's south. The problem now threatens to depress exports and tourism from the Naples area, a region that has suffered deeply from Italy's protracted recession and where unemployment tops 22%.

The garbage problem in Naples, Italy's third-largest city, stretches back to the 1980s, when the mafia began to infiltrate large waste-disposal operations.

In the 1990s, local mafia, known as the Camorra, realized how lucrative the waste business could be and started to fill the region with industrial garbage - including nuclear waste, according to one mafia boss in testimony before an Italian parliamentary committee - coming from several European countries and other parts of Italy. Snaking lines of trucks, under the Camorra's guidance, traveled to the region's peripheral areas and illegally dumped the trash, burying tons of waste in fields or in landfills that were authorized only for the disposal of ordinary waste, according to some magistrates and local politicians. They say they suspect that organized crime continues to dump the trash, albeit in smaller amounts.

Over the past two decades, as much as 10 million tons of industrial garbage have been illegally dumped in the region around Naples, according to environmental group Legambiente. The mafia, as well as local businesses that collude with them, have also allegedly begun burning toxic trash, including tires and leather-tanning chemicals, the group says. Such waste is normally disposed of in special facilities that prevent the toxic substances from contaminating the surrounding area.

Evidence is mounting of the damage inflicted by years of illegal dumping and of bonfires that are set virtually every day. For instance, the U.S. Navy analyzed local water supplies between 2009 and 2011 in several areas of the Campania region, where Naples sits and where some U.S. military and civilian personnel live, and found that water wasn't up to U.S. safety standards. As a result, it relocated some staff away from polluted areas and suggests the use of bottled water both on and off the base.

Concerns for the safety of the region's food supplies - Naples is home to the prized buffalo mozzarella, for instance - have also surged. A consortium producing buffalo mozzarella estimates that sales in Italy dropped by as much as 40% in October alone because of fears about contaminated water and smoke from the toxic bonfires. It says it fears that exports will soon suffer, too, as foreigners become aware of the trash problem.

Local authorities have seized some fields as a precautionary measure, but farmers fear buyers will shun even uncontaminated produce because of the negative publicity.

"We risk paying a high toll for something we're not responsible for," says Prisco Lucio Sorbo, regional director of farmers' association Coldiretti.

Judicial and political authorities have been slow to respond, some environmental groups and residents say. Stefano Caldoro, head of the Campania region, says he was already aware of the issue as soon as he took charge of the region in 2010. "I just found a general silence over this issue when I arrived," he says.

Local authorities have been analyzing samples of water and soil but so far have declined to make their findings public, a situation that heightened public concern. Researchers looking to assess whether the waste problem may have increased cancer rates among the local population have struggled to get adequate data from officials, while local businesses say they are clamoring for data to reassure consumers and tourists. Some experts who were called as part of judicial investigations into the illegal dumping believe the impact could stretch decades more.

The local authorities have collected all the data and will publish the results soon, they say, with delays the result of the huge quantity of data. Mr. Caldoro added that the regional administration has started to clear up some of the affected areas. But he said a timeline for completion remained uncertain and efforts must be intensified.

"We've asked the region to provide clear data on which areas are contaminated," says Antonio Lucisano, head of the consortium representing about 100 regional mozzarella producers. "Otherwise, consumers' perception will be that all the food produced [here] is dangerous."

Although the mafia's ties to local waste disposal have waned compared with decades ago, investigators have made only slow progress in cracking down on those responsible for past dumping. Magistrates have carried out about 80 investigations into the illegal industrial waste-disposal activities started in the 1980s. But long waiting times in Italian courts have led to the expiration of the statute of limitations on many of the cases. Only a few cases have resulted in convictions.

Earlier this month, a Naples court sentenced one mafia boss to 20 years in prison for water contamination and environmental disaster. Magistrates have launched inquests in recent years into local politicians accused of colluding in the illegal dumping.

Meanwhile, the European Commission decided in June to refer Italy back to the European Court of Justice "for its long-running failure to manage waste adequately in the Campania region." The court had already ruled in 2010 that Italy had failed to adhere to EU waste regulation in Naples.

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