

Mafia toxic waste dumping poisons Italy farmlands (Update)

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In this Nov. 18, 2013 photo, rubbish is piled up on the edge of cultivated land near Caivano, in the surroundings of Naples, southern Italy. Dozens of fields in the area were sequestered by police, prohibiting any one from harvesting or even setting foot on the plot. Decades of toxic waste dumping by the Camorra crime syndicate that dominates the Naples area poisoned wells, authorities have found in recent months, tainting the water that irrigates crops with high levels of lead, arsenic and the industrial solvent tetrachloride. (AP Photo/Salvatore Laporta)

On **Ciro Fusco's farm** in the shadow of Mount Vesuvius, police swooped

down one recent day and planted a warning sign in his broccoli fields, prohibiting anyone from harvesting or even setting foot on the plot. Dozens of other fields in the area were sequestered in the same way. Decades of toxic waste dumping by the Camorra crime syndicate that dominates the Naples area poisoned wells, authorities have found in recent months, tainting the water that irrigates crops with high levels of lead, arsenic and the industrial solvent tetrachloride.

The warning came too late: Fusco had already sold some of his broccoli at nearby markets.

The farmlands around Naples, authorities say, are contaminated from the Mafia's multibillion-dollar racket in disposing toxic waste, mainly from industries in the wealthy north that ask no questions about where the garbage goes as long as it's taken off their hands—for a fraction of the cost of legal disposal. The poisoning is triggering widespread fear and outrage in the Naples area, and tens of thousands of people marched through the city's chaotic streets last month demanding to know whether they have been eating tainted vegetables for years.

In an interview with The Associated Press, the head of the Naples environmental police force rattled off a list of substances in higher than permissible levels contaminating 13 irrigation wells on farmlands: arsenic, cadmium, tin, beryllium and other metals; tetrachloride and toluene among other chemicals used as industrial solvents.

Gen. Sergio Costa did not provide specific levels as tests were ongoing, but described the amounts as reaching "dangerous" levels. On one farm in Caivano, Costa said, four times the permissible level of lead was found in the irrigation well's water. Cabbages irrigated by that water were found to be contaminated with lead, although tomatoes irrigated with the same well showed no harmful lead levels, said Costa—illustrating the complexity of testing crops for toxicity. The wells

are not used for drinking water.

Analyses of the vegetables are still being conducted, and Fusco was waiting to learn if his family's farm's broccoli was tainted. Costa said the crops, irrigated by wells later found to be contaminated, were sold only in markets in the Naples area. Officials estimate that waste seepage from one of the more notorious sites, a hill-like dump in the nearby farm town of Giugliano, a short drive away, will keep poisoning the water for half a century.

A top Camorra boss, Francesco Bidognetti, was convicted last month of poisoning the water table in the town of Gugliano with toxic waste and received a 20-year sentence. It was by far the stiffest punishment yet for waste dumping and a strong sign that the state is cracking down on the lucrative racket. Much of the waste the Camorra has trafficked has come from factories, processing plants and hospitals, mainly trucked down from in Italy's industrial north to the mobsters' power base near Naples and Caserta.

Some of the waste was buried under a soccer field in Casal di Principe, the stronghold of the Casalesi crime clan that dominates the illicit business, along with a few other families. Naples-based anti-Mafia Prosecutor Giovanni Conzo said in an interview that waste was also buried under a water-skiing pool in the town of Castel Volturno, near the sea.



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Camorristi "poisoned their own territory, they poisoned their own blood," said Costa, the Naples environmental police force chief.

According to a nationwide environmentalist group, Legambiente, Camorra mobsters since 1991 have systematically dumped, burned or buried nearly 10 million tons of waste, almost all of it coming from factories that either don't seek to know where the waste ends up or are complicit in the crimes. According to evidence used in trials, the waste contained PCBs, asbestos, industrial sludge and metal drums filled with

dangerous solvents used to make paint.

"How could this all happen?" Michele Buonomo, Legambiente's Naples-area president, said in an interview.

Franco Roberti, Italy's top organized crime fighter, offers an explanation.

It wasn't just the Camorra profiting off the waste racket, he said in an AP interview: In Italy's industrial north, factories and processing plants saved at least half the cost of the going rate of legitimate waste disposal or detoxification. Companies falsified documentation identifying the wastes' content, said the national anti-Mafia prosecutor. In the Camorra's power base, he added, town officials, dump operators or farmers with vacant land closed an eye for their own payoff.

Roberti said the first Camorra turncoat to reveal the business of waste trafficking told him in interrogations that "monnezza"—Neapolitan for garbage—was, in effect, worth its weight in gold.

Investigators' first big break came in 2007, nearly 20 years after the mobsters started trafficking in wastes. Turncoat Gaetano Vassallo, from the Casalesi clan, gave prosecutors a "very complete picture" about the racket, Roberti recalled. He told them where waste had been dumped and buried. And he indicated which companies, mainly in Italy's north, were turning to the Camorra to cart away waste.

Vassallo's tips were borne out when investigators, using backhoes and shovels, dug into the sprawling Giugliano dump. Exhaustive analyses of soil samples by a geologist in a two-year study, whose results were made public this fall, found many of the cancer-causing or otherwise harmful substances exactly where the turncoat said Bidognetti had them dumped over several years. Some of the waste trafficked by Bidognetti allegedly

came from a major dye-manufacturing plant in the northwest Piedmont region, which was eventually shut down after Piedmont residents grew alarmed when local rivers were colored with the factory's runoff.



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Geologist Giovanni Balestri's study, commissioned by Naples-based anti-Mafia prosecutors, of soil and aquifers contaminated by the dump found a laundry lists of substances similar to those discovered around the Caivano farms: Chromium, lead, nickel, sulfates, toluene and other substances—all in concentrations higher than, often far exceeding, permissible levels.

Costa said the vegetables irrigated by water from contaminated wells was destined for local markets, not supermarkets—whose strict quality standards, backed up by spot-checks, would virtually eliminate the possibility of any tainted produce from reaching tables beyond the Camorra's backyard.

Italy's agriculture minister last month hastened to assure consumers that testing of the produce is continuing "non-stop." Nunzia De Girolamo was referring to a strategy devised by Costa: Since much of the waste seeps down to aquifers, which feed irrigation wells, his squad is analyzing the water of each well supplied by the contaminated aquifers, a painstaking process that started this year and will take several more months to complete.

Farmers scoffed at the idea their vegetables—a key part of the much-touted healthy Mediterranean diet—would be bad to eat.

"I eat them, my sons eat them and my grandchildren eat them," said Domenico Della Corte, holding up a cauliflower as big as a bridal bouquet.

Meanwhile, Naples anti-mafia prosecutor Conzo speaks of another fear: The mob may be poised to cash in on the massive cleanup—using its time-tested expertise at muscling in on public contracts.

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