

Despite EU fines, Greece struggling to promote recycling

April 9 2017, by Tatyana Rassos



Greek households recycle only 16 percent of their waste, well short of the European average and nowhere near EU targets

A steady stream of EU fines and two decades of trying have failed to get recycling off the ground in Greece, where eco-awareness is only half-heartedly promoted by authorities.

According the European environment agency, only 16 percent of

household waste is recycled across the country, compared to a 50-percent target by 2020 under EU directives.

In contrast, the European recycling average is 28 percent, with Slovenia leading at 49 percent and Latvia bringing up the rear at 3 percent.

In Athens, with nearly four million inhabitants out of the country's 11 million, only 13 percent of eligible waste is recycled, town hall figures show.

"We don't have a clear strategy and then we don't have a political will to materialise this strategy," notes Dimitris Ibrahim, a spokesman for the Greek branch of Greenpeace.

Around many parts of the country, and especially in the countryside, garbage is still scattered piecemeal in makeshift dumps—one of them on a hillside on Andros island actually collapsed under the strain in 2011, burying a beach below in the process.

In 2014, Greece still had some 70 dumps, most of them tolerated if not actively run by municipal authorities.

In June 2014, nearly a decade after a prior conviction, Greece was ordered to pay a fine of nearly 15 million euros every six months over the continued operation of illegal landfills.

This despite the country's prized tourism industry that requires an unspoilt environment.

The European Court of Justice has repeatedly condemned Greece on this score, levelling fines amounting to millions of euros (dollars), with the latest ruling in September.

"The mentality needs to change, and urgently," says Antigone Dalamaga, head of the Ecological Recycling Society association.

It takes "incentives and counter incentives... you need to convince your citizens of the necessity and of the positive affect of recycling," she notes.



Greece has been repeatedly fined over its failure to clamp down on illegal landfills

It's all voluntary

But even today, Greeks are only encouraged to sort out their household waste on a voluntary basis. No fines are involved.

And Mary Krimnanioti, who runs the EU-funded "Zero Waste" programme in Greece, says the logic behind the municipal waste collection—which charges residents depending on property size—is flawed.

"It is not (calculated) according to the waste you throw away, it's according to the (surface area in) square metres of your house," she told AFP.

Therefore, a small house with 10 people, which every day throws out 10 [garbage bags](#), pays the same as one person living in an equivalent home.

If people had to pay for their garbage bags, as is the case in northern Europe, they would be more motivated to throw out less, Krimnanioti argues.

Instead, most Greeks just put their trash in plastic supermarket bags, which are freely available at the till.

The economic crisis gripping the country since 2010 has helped a little, with people buying less and throwing away less too.

In Athens alone, waste generation fell by around 35 percent between 2011 and 2016 according to municipal figures.

And another recent phenomenon—mass immigration—has also found itself linked to [waste](#) management, albeit of an irregular sort beyond the scope of official statistics.

To make a living, many economic migrants now hunt the streets of Athens and other major cities for metal, paper and plastic, hoping to sell it to scrap yards.

Roma groups ply a similar trade, and have in the past been chased down by authorities for burning plastic cables to get at the copper within, polluting the environment in the process.

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