

Turkey: Europe's top destination for... trash

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Imported plastic waste meant to be recycled is ending up being dumped illegally in Turkey

Tonnes of plastic packaging destined for recycling from popular British supermarkets like Sainsbury's and French frozen food retailer Picard is instead ending up being dumped illegally in Turkey as the country has become the top destination for European waste.

Recycling firms in Turkey defend the rise in imports, arguing the [waste plastic](#) is needed for the growing industry which allows the reuse of material that otherwise clogs landfills for decades.

But the environmental consequences are increasingly hard to ignore, with illegally dumped plastics visible around the growing number of sites in southern Turkey where European plastics are meant to be processed.

There are at least 10 known sites. AFP visited three last month and a reporting team came across a fourth by accident after discovering a fresh load dumped on the side of a road in southern Adana province.

Piled in mounds or strewn in ditches, AFP identified [plastic waste](#) from the UK, France, Italy and the Netherlands.

"European citizens need to know this: the last stop for their waste that they carefully separate into different boxes is not a recycling facility," said Sedat Gundogdu, a professor at Cukurova University in Adana.

"It's here where there are mountains of waste," he told AFP in front of a mound of illegally dumped [plastic](#).



Dumped illegally alongside roadsides, some of the plastic waste is burned to get to metal, letting noxious fumes into the air

While it is unclear just how much of the imported waste plastic meant to be recycled is ending up in illegal dumps, as long as recycling is expensive it remains a possibility.

As Western Europe pays for the waste to be taken away, there is a financial temptation for Turkish firms that import it to dump it rather than pay to recycle it.

Interpol warned in August about the rising involvement of criminal organisations in the global illegal plastic waste trade.

And activists have warned about the environmental problems caused by illegal dumping and burning of plastic waste.

'Can't easily be controlled'

Despite its green aspirations, the EU still recycles less than a third of its plastic waste, burning or burying the rest. It only recycles half that itself, sending the remainder abroad.

Turkey became Europe's go-to destination for plastic waste after China began to close its doors to foreign waste from January 2018.



An aerial view of an illegal dump site for plastic waste

Monthly imports of plastic waste from Europe leapt by more than ten-fold from 2016 to 2019, according to Eurostat data, with Turkey taking in nearly a quarter of what the EU exported last year.

Britain led the way by far, accounting for over a quarter by itself.

In September, Turkey's environment ministry instructed recycling companies to import no more than 50 percent of their needs and to source the other half domestically.

Meanwhile, Greenpeace Mediterranean has called for a total ban on plastic waste imports in Turkey and also pointed to the lack of inspections and transparency over the sector's operations in Turkey.

Cukurova University professor Gundogdu agreed: "This isn't a thing that can be easily controlled".

Waste mountains or thread

But not all plastics imported from Europe end up being dumped along roadsides, as AFP saw in the province of Gaziantep, where an empty Sainsbury's bottle of olive oil began its journey to become thread.



Zafer Kaplan GAMA Recycle imports huge bales of plastic waste that is turned into thread for clothes and fabrics

Plastic bottles imported from Europe and the United States are cleaned, ground into flakes and melted down to become fibre which is then transformed into thread for use in clothes.

GAMA Recycle exports 1,500 tonnes of it every month to 30 countries including Spain.

The company's chairman Zafer Kaplan said some of the recycled thread is used by global brands such as H&M, Zara and Ikea as well as Turkish fashion retailers.

'Good for the environment'

Although Kaplan acknowledged Turkey needs to improve its domestic waste collection system, he said "even if we collected all of our waste, this wouldn't be enough to meet the recycling industry's needs."

Demand for the recycled products from European and Middle Eastern countries outstrips what Turkey could produce from domestic plastic waste, Kaplan said.



Recyclers say that are giving a new life to materials that would otherwise clog up a landfill or be burnt

Moreover, it is taking "material that would not decompose for many years" if left in landfills and "makes it something that can be reused," said Mehmet Dasdemir, who coordinates the research and development department at GAMA.

"And this is good for the environment."

False idea about recycling

But Gundogdu said there is a false idea among the public that plastic is suitable for use as it is being recycled, when a drastic reduction in their use is needed.

Environmentalists now worry about a surge in the use of plastic because of the coronavirus pandemic as people don masks, gloves and other personal protective equipment usage.



Turkish activists want Europeans to know that not all their waste is being recycled

Some of the illegally dumped [waste](#) ends up in rivers that empty into the Mediterranean Sea, with the plastic washing up on Turkish beaches, putting the tourism industry at risk.

"We come across single-use plastics the most in the seas," said Greenpeace Mediterranean's plastics project director Nihan Temiz Atas, who called for a ban on their use.

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