

Germany Picks Up Scent of Profit

In Solving Naples's Trash Crisis

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On Friday, a train pulled into a depot in Hamburg delivering 500 metric tons of Italy's latest export: trash.

Rotting tomatoes, espresso grinds, deflated soccer balls -- the cargo was a mere sampling of the rivers of garbage that has choked the streets of Naples and its surrounding villages for months, making it a stinking symbol of national shame in Italy.

In the well-manicured environs of Hamburg, however, the trash received the warmest of welcomes. "This looks quite good to us," said Rüdiger Siechau, chief executive of Stadtreinigung Hamburg, a state-owned waste-management company that Naples has tapped to make its trash problem go away.

The Hamburg plant is just one of several incinerators across Germany that have recently cut deals with the Italian government to burn up to 200,000 tons of Neapolitan rubbish, generating power, some carbon-dioxide emissions and plenty of cash.

In Europe, throwing out trash has become big business. According to a March report by the European Topic Centre on Resource and Waste Management, about 15% of the continent's hazardous trash, or 8.6 million tons, was disposed of outside its country of origin in 2003, the latest year for which figures are available.

Ninety percent of that traffic took place within the European Union, as cities with too much trash opened up their wallets to foreign plants willing to make room for the unwanted rubbish, much of it hazardous. Plants in northern Germany charge between €150 and €250 (\$237 to \$394) to incinerate one ton of waste, estimates Christian Fischer, a waste-management analyst who co-authored the March report.

For an industry that thrives on cleaning up after others, the southern port city of Naples is a goldmine. Dumps in and around the city have been operating under a state of emergency for years as residents blocked efforts to build incinerators near their homes. As politicians bickered, pressure on Naples's brimming landfills mounted.

There has been little sympathy for Naples in Italy's wealthier north, where resentment toward the troubled city runs high. When former Prime Minister Romano Prodi raised the specter of finding a home for Naples's trash in Northern Italy earlier this year, a regional governor told him: "Not one kilo."

By January the city's beleaguered dumps reached their limit and, like a sleeping Vesuvius, erupted in the form of shoulder-high mounds of refuse that flowed into the streets, drawing armies of rats and protesters. Angry Neapolitans began to blockade traffic with the garbage, burning the giant heaps and releasing hazardous fumes.

Exacerbating the stalemate is Naples's mob, the Camorra. For years, it has stuffed the city's landfills with trash illegally procured from northern cities. The Camorra has grabbed an even

larger share of the city's garbage-hauling contracts after vetting standards were relaxed to cope with the current crisis.

Last week, Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi held his first cabinet meeting since his election in April in Naples to show his determination to tackle the crisis. Mr. Berlusconi appointed a trash czar to come up with solutions and also ordered Italy's military into Naples to guard the cleanup efforts.

Mr. Berlusconi's plan also calls for the construction of the city's first trash incinerator and the addition of new garbage dumps. Those moves, however, have further stoked public anger leading to clashes between protesters and police over the weekend.

Moreover, the planned overhaul doesn't solve the more immediate dilemma of finding a place for the trash already piled up in city streets. "The system is completely paralyzed," says Rosanna Laraia, head of waste management in Italy's Ministry for the Environment.

Germany's incinerators offer a convenient stop gap. The Italian government approached Germany for assistance in February, according to Mr. Siechau. Officials from German waste-management companies quickly began calculating how much room Germany had for Naples' trash and how to get it there.

Spare storage space was measured, and transport options were weighed. Shipping the trash on boats, Mr. Siechau said, was cheap but impractical. "Not enough boats," he said.

Hauling the rubbish to Germany by train was a more delicate operation: Although household trash bound for incineration isn't classified as strictly hazardous, such garbage is troublesome enough to require permission from EU countries to cross their borders. That meant involving Austria, which borders Italy and Germany, in the negotiations, Mr. Siechau said.

After months of talks a deal was reached to ship 200,000 tons of Neapolitan trash to Germany. That sum is equivalent to the amount of trash burned at an average-size incineration plant in one year, says Mr. Fischer, the waste-management analyst.

The Hamburg plant will receive 30,000 tons of trash from Naples over a 10-week period. Mr. Siechau said the plant was charging more than €100 per ton. It wasn't clear who was paying; the waste-management company said only that negotiations with the Italians took place at both the national and city level.

At a news conference in Hamburg arranged to greet the arrival of the first shipment on Friday, plant officials were full of praise for the smelly cargo. The plant will burn the trash at temperatures of up to 1,000 degrees Celsius, Mr. Siechau noted, creating water vapor to heat Hamburg homes.

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