

WEEE needs action

■ IT IS A HUMID DAY IN HANOI, NORTHERN VIETNAM. IN THE OFFICE OF AN INTERNATIONAL conservation group, a large aerial photograph on the wall shows in detail the river border between Vietnam and China, about 150km from Hanoi. A staff member is explaining how the main town of Mong Cai, on the Vietnamese border, has become a centre for smuggling all manner of contraband, from endangered wildlife to narcotics. Many small boats are visible in the photo, perfect for crossing the river to China.

To the east of Mong Cai, a cleared area can be seen; it is explained that this is where shipping containers full of electronic waste arrive by road from Haiphong port. From here, the waste is transferred into small, fast boats and smuggled into China.

This remote border crossing is just one of many links in the global illegal trade in WEEE. In May, the Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA), a London-based NGO, released a report, *System Failure*, revealing the UK's unenviable record as the source for illicit WEEE turning up in west Africa. Investigations by the EIA also show that UK WEEE reaches Vietnam.

The publication of the EIA's findings was timed to coincide with the broadcast of a BBC *Panorama* documentary probing the UK's WEEE trade. The release of this new information into the public domain has raised concerns among both politicians and companies in the waste sector. The challenge now is to convert this concern into effective action to curb the UK's involvement in this illegal business.

In terms of companies named by the EIA and *Panorama*, the response has been swift. WEEE recycler Sanak Ventures had its status as an approved authorised treatment facility suspended by the Environment Agency in early June and, by late July, its premises in North London appeared abandoned. WEEE recycler Environmental Waste Controls (EWC) announced its support for the EIA's recommendations, and has undertaken an internal investigation, as well as instructing subcontractors that no electronic equipment deposited at sites run by EWC should leave the UK. Prosecution of an exporter is also underway.

Yet the EIA's findings provide only a snapshot into a much wider problem. To reduce the flow of illicit WEEE leaving the UK, reform of the regulatory system is needed. In June, the EIA met Clive Efford, Labour MP for Eltham. He tabled an early day motion 1992 entitled 'Electronic Waste Recycling' on 23 June, which has attracted cross-party support. The EIA will also meet key government agencies, especially Defra and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, to outline its recommendations for a review of compliance schemes and comprehensive auditing of WEEE.

Julian Newman reveals the effect of recent exposés on illegal operations



The UK's illicit WEEE turns up in Africa, among other places around the globe

AT A GLANCE
Recent investigations into illegal WEEE operations have grabbed the attention of the public and the Government

The EIA has further been encouraged by the positive response from several waste management companies. It seems there is a genuine desire among industry leaders to clean up the WEEE trade and force the 'dodgy dealers' out of the business. Specific remedies to the problem have been put forward by a range of interest groups, such as the charity Computer Aid, which in May issued the report *How to End All E-Waste*.

Since releasing its findings, the EIA has also received several tip-offs from the public alleging illegal operations involving WEEE and these are currently being followed up. There has also been interest in the EIA's report from the international enforcement community. For example, in mid-July, EIA presented its work on WEEE at a meeting in Bangkok attended by representatives from the Asia region offices of Interpol and the World Customs Organisation.

The interest generated among the public, industry and media by the EIA's report and the *Panorama* programme is encouraging, but interest alone changes nothing. There have been exposés in the past of illegal trade in WEEE from the UK, yet business has continued as usual.

During the coming months, the EIA will push to build support for real change to the way WEEE is managed in the UK. It will also seek to keep the pressure on those involved in illegal trade through further covert investigations. ■

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