

# A Very Dirty Story

text and photos by *Eduardo Di Blasi*

**The waste disposal crisis that still afflicts Naples and the Campania region has roots that date back decades, with both the Italian government and the local underworld sharing blame and profits.**

**I**N OCTOBER, seven Italian officials, including senior army officers, a geologist, an architect, an environmental executives, found themselves under house arrest accused of having planned and carried through the development of a “temporary” waste storage facility in Ferrandelle near the hamlet of Santa Maria La Fossa in Italy’s Caserta province. Until a few years ago, the waste site was a farm owned by

Francesco “Sandokan” Schiavone, a linchpin Naples underworld boss tied to the so-called Casalesi clan.

The 350,00-ton capacity site, located just above an aquifer, was hastily put together to help deal with Naples’ 2008 waste disposal emergency. Now, the men who created are being charged in connection with water pollution. According to prosecutors, they “willfully ignored” presence of a waterway located mere meters



Garbage at the Maruzzella facility in San Tammaro. The site has been home to the Campania region’s refuse for months and is nearly full.

from concrete pen that housed the waste. When the concrete cracked a few months later, damaging the waterproof underpinning, toxic ingredients seeped into local groundwater. The words “environmental disaster” have come up often, but that’s no surprise. Similar terms were used in connection with makeshift solutions devised by waste emergency commissioners Antonio Bassolino (2000-2004) and Guido Bertolaso (2006-2007), both tasked with cleaning up the mess.

“Temporary” waste storage facilities are nothing more than vast open dumps, hit-and-run style. Though cement-based and ostensibly waterproof, they’re ill-equipped to deal with the corrosive effect of liquid pollutants that form as a result of the decomposition of organic waste. So they leak.

Between 2000 and 2011, Campania, whose capital is Naples, was littered with such facilities. Local mayors and government officials appeared to have no other way to handle the waste overspill. Instead, they hauled thousands of tons to garbage to these makeshift landfills.

How a serious but fixable solution, at least in most developed countries, was transformed by Italy into a series of emergencies demands perspective, facts, and turning back the clock.

Campania got its first emergency waste commissioner in 1994, under the technocratic government of Prime Minister Carlo Azeglio Ciampi government. The decision wasn’t based on any systematic effort to build an integrated waste cycle, as many at the time believed, but to attempt to wrest waste management away from the Naples underworld, which is run by the Camorra. Over the years, Camorra bosses had created a series of



Waste piled up along the Regi Lagni, Bourbon-era canals whose banks are a favorite Camorra dump site.

local landfills where they could bury toxic industrial waste kinds, most of it trucked down from northern Italy. The extremely lucrative practice of waste trafficking not only poisoned once-fertile agricultural territory but also helped trigger what historian Gerardo Marotta, a Naples scholar and the founder of Italian Institute for Philosophical Studies, calls the “toxic waste bourgeoisie.” He used the phrase to describe a predatory entrepreneurial class that worked hand in glove with the underworld, often forming part of it.

The Naples garbage problem, which saw some city streets swamped with refuse, began only in 2001, when



Garbage holding facility at Ferrandelle. It was assailed for being too close to local waterways, which risked poisoning.

the so-called Ronchi Decree banned all landfills, most of them saturated. Local mayors didn't know where to turn. Though a regional waste plan developed in 1997 should have been up and running by 2001, it wasn't. In fact, it's still not operational, 15 years after its development and 12 years after the first crisis.

According to the terms of the tender won by the national construction firm Impregilo, the company would build a giant incinerator that would be operational by Dec. 31, 2000 and handle most of the city's garbage. The plant would become the waste disposal centerpiece for all Naples and its adjoining areas. Within a year, seven preliminary waste "packaging" plants would go up, in essence refineries that would prepare refuse for burning so that it could be transformed into so-called Waste Derived Fuel (CDF). It was a Germanic timetable, and one that proved outside the reach of any and all reality.

There was no incinerator ready to deal with the 2001 backlog (the first one to be activated only eight years later, in March 2009). In fact, by the end of 2001, only four of the seven planned CDF plants were operative. Those plants produced a separate dilemma, producing so-called "eco-bales" that had nowhere to go. Eco-bales, a term that never existed before, defined giant clumps of poorly chopped trash, weighing about a ton each. Based on existing law, these clumps were too damp to burn in existing incinerators, and the

promised larger plant didn't exist.

In a nutshell, as 2001 ended, Campania had an under-construction refuse system under construction with an existing one that was all but useless. Defying all reason, Impregilo was handed an extension: It could store waste until the incinerator was ready. In essence it was allowed to shop for temporary solutions.

That opened the door to yet another environmental disaster.

Within three years, the Taverna del Re landfill was chock with six million heavy eco-bales, creating a pyramid that covered some 4.5 square kilometers. The waste pyramid, which endures today, is larger than the nearby town of Calvizzano, a testament to the failure of the Italy's political and business class.

But the making of the pyramid had its own commercial logic. Banks that financed Impregilo had one goal; to reap Italian government subsidies aimed at institutions that helped produce energy from renewable or recycled sources. In the case of incinerators, the payments depended on tons of waste burned. In effect, the eco-bales were money in the bank. Why burn them until authorities pushed?

So began the rest of the problem.

With no waste operating treatment plants and the landfills declared closed (reopened in "emergencies"), local mayors and government officials were left with two choices, neither one good: temporary storage sites and dumpsters. Both became new Camorra businesses that fueled the toxic waste bourgeoisie.

Industry and government both bear their share of blame.

Bipartisan street protests against the waste situation ironically slowed down both emergency relief and efforts to create a systematic structural response (it was difficult to identify any one “plan”). The chaos produced a thriving “welfare” emergency all parties took advantage of. Local officials and companies, police and municipal governments, as well as the state, hired some 12,000 employees to collect garbage no one knew what to do with or where to take. No recycling protocol was ever applied to the haphazard collection process. This helped generate a multi-billion euro hole that still weighs on the region’s fragile waste collection and disposal system.

This sad legacy brings us to the present day.

In an effort to ward off European Union sanctions, the region sent a memo to Brussels detailing the status quo and explaining how it intended to manage going forward. It makes for enlightening if troubling reading. Campania produces 1.6 tons of waste per citizen annually. Of this amount, 430,000 tons end up in landfills at Chiaiano (now under legal lockdown), Terzigno, San Tammaro and Savignano Irpino. Some 600,000 tons are trucked to the Acerra incinerator, while 287,000 are disposed of outside the region (and also outside Italy). About 194,000 tons is processed in other regional landfills. In short, there is no functional waste cycle, no processing chain. All it takes is the slightest breakdown at any one of these spots and chaos reigns.

Relief from this vicious cycle calls for the construction of two new incinerators, improvement of recycling efforts (Naples, which produces 66 percent of all waste, recycles 39 percent of its trash, but the regional figure stands at 26 percent). The region has also pledged to



Provisional holding facility for so-called “ecobales” located near the Campania town of Giugliano. It was created by a local ordinance in 2005.

build composting plants to treat wet waste (now treated outside the region at substantial costs) and has said it will open more landfills by 2015.

It has also announced plans for the building of a waste incinerator dedicated exclusively to the Taverna del Re eco-bales, saying it will be complete by 2015. The famous pyramid, say local officials, will take longer to dismantle. It will continue lording over nearby land until 2028.