

Rome's waste crisis turns into golden opportunity for Dutch

Mayor Roberto Gualtieri seeks to replace 'inefficient system' with long-term export contracts and new incinerator

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Dutch merchants grew rich from the spice trade with east Asia in the 17th century. The country's latest imports have a more repellent scent but still smell of money. Rome's refuse problem has become Amsterdam's business opportunity as the Dutch take advantage of the EU's single market in waste.

Roberto Gualtieri, the Italian capital's mayor who took over in October 2021, has dispensed with shadowy local refuse traders and signed new multiyear contracts with utilities, including in the Netherlands, to help clean up the mountains of rubbish frequently piling up on Rome's streets.

EU regulations have been forcing waste out of dumps and into recycling facilities and incinerators in an attempt to clean up the continent. As part of its focus on environmental sustainability, Brussels is clamping down on the burying of rubbish in landfill. By 2035, EU member states will only be permitted to bury up to 10 per cent of their municipal waste — a target that only nine of the 27 member states had met as of 2020. Many responded by taxing landfill. The Netherlands has upped recycling, including deposit bottle schemes, and built incinerators. In addition to taking refuse from Italy, it is also a net importer of rubbish from Belgium, Germany, France and the UK.

By contrast, when Rome's privately owned Malagrotta landfill — the largest in Europe — was shut down after it became an environmental disaster in 2013, city officials struggled on a short-term, impromptu basis to find takers for the city's waste. "We are changing a system where a lot of profits were made at the expense of the quality of the cleanliness of the city," Gualtieri said from his city hall office, overlooking the ruins of the ancient Roman forum.

"It will not only be more ecological, but it will also be more economical." Rome's mayor Roberto Gualtieri has signed long-term waste export contracts worth €100mn a year. Rome has suffered recurrent crises in recent years when waste traders, suspected of links to Italy's criminal underworld, would suddenly refuse to haul the city's rubbish to landfills, incinerators or recyclers at a reasonable price, citing equipment breakdowns, lack of space or other problems. Public anger has mounted, with about 150 prominent Romans writing to Unesco last summer to remind city officials of their duty to maintain the cleanliness of Rome's historic centre, a World Heritage site since 1980. "You had cyclical crises, with Rome full of garbage," said Gualtieri, a former finance minister and EU lawmaker. He said he had found a "surreal" situation after entering office, with negotiations every two weeks about "who takes this, who takes that". "It was a very inefficient system — very opaque also," he added.

Now, Gualtieri has signed long-term contracts with utilities in Amsterdam and Bologna "so we have certainty . . . transparency, we know how much it costs and we don't risk that we end up without someone [to take it]". In total, Rome plans to spend €100mn a year to have about 460,000 tonnes of trash removed.

The contracts are expected to run until 2026. By then, Gualtieri hopes Rome will have a new €800mn waste-to-energy incinerator, plus several recycling plants, to fully process its own refuse and end the decade-long crisis. "Rome cannot export all its waste," Gualtieri said.

But unlike in the Netherlands, building an incinerator for Rome is a politically sensitive plan, which even played a part in the collapse of Mario Draghi's government last year. Back then, the populist Five Star Movement, which was part of the Draghi cabinet and continues to oppose the incinerator on environmental grounds, boycotted a vote of confidence that included a reference to the waste-burning plans.

Rome's 2.8mn residents — and last year's estimated 24mn visitors — generate about 1.7mn tonnes of rubbish a year. Of that total, just under half was sorted and dispatched for recycling, mostly locally, the mayor said. Under the new deals, 250,000 tonnes of Rome's mixed waste will be sent every year to the Netherlands, Germany and possibly other EU countries for incineration. Currently, 57 per cent of the Netherlands' local refuse is recycled or composted while 33 per cent is incinerated. This leaves room for incinerators such as Amsterdam's AEB, owned by the city council and licensed to handle 1.4mn tonnes of waste a year, to take in rubbish from other countries.

"Spare capacity is mainly the result of successful recycling policies in the Netherlands," said AEB spokesperson Esther Sloots. "Recycling efforts over the past 15 years have led to increasing volumes of recycled materials and decreasing volumes of residual waste." AEB first began importing waste in 2010 and now about a third of its total consumption — more than 400,000 tonnes — comes from countries such as Italy, Belgium, Germany, France and the UK. Rome's deal with Amsterdam has not solved all of its problems. AMA, the waste collector owned by the Italian city, struggled with employees not showing up for work, Gualtieri said, while orders of new collection bins have been delayed by supply chain disruptions. But Rome's mayor is confident the city is "overcoming" the chaos of the past. "It will take some time to reach perfection, but we are out of the crisis." This story has been corrected to clarify that Rome generates about 1.7mn tonnes of rubbish a year, not billion.