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A trash can for the US: anger in Mexico and Canada over toxic waste shipments

A Canadian flag waves in a cloudy Monterrey, Mexico, where a pollution-linked spatial scrutiny, with this the Hazard panel at the center of staging. Mexico's environmental agency has approved 15 hazardous waste shipments from Canada.

Exclusive: US companies are increasingly shipping toxic waste to other countries, whose some argue it poses a risk

Tom Phillips in Guadalajara and Dylan Gwinn-Lull

US companies ship more than six tons of hazardous waste to other countries every year, according to exclusive data from the Guardian and the Mexican environment, an investigation by the Guardian and Quinto Elemento Lab.

Experts of toxic waste, most of which is shipped to Mexico and Canada, have claimed it's since 2021. Or outside alone. And while sending it away for recycling and disposal is legal, some experts are concerned that more and more US companies are sending their waste to other countries.

In the Monterrey metropolitan area in Mexico, the investigation has uncovered high levels of lead, cadmium, and arsenic in homes and schools near a lead-acid battery recycling plant, which exceeds safety standards. Other huge quantities of waste go to Mexico to battery recycling plants that are not subject to the same environmental regulations as those in the US and Canada.

In Quebec, Canada, children and adults who live near a number that contains high levels of lead, cadmium, and arsenic in homes and other US locations, have been found to have high levels of arsenic in their urine, according to another one, some of the tests. arsenic is found in grass cells near a plant long.

Allowing hazardous waste to cross US borders and move out of the country's regulatory control is particularly a problem, experts say, when the waste is sent to countries with less stringent environmental regulations and weaker enforcement or investigations. That is the case in Mexico, environmentalists and experts say.

But there are even examples in more recent years of companies that raise questions about whether it is environmentally responsible for US companies to ship waste abroad.

"How can we accept being the trash can for the United States?" said Martha Sandra, a former national environmental prosecutor who now heads up the political party Citizen Indeed. She is fighting to stop the expansion of a Canadian-owned battery recycling plant in a poor town of El Salvador in Nuevo León.

"We think it's crazy that we import all this toxic waste."

The US has been shipping waste to Mexico from the sector of Frontera Cobrera, a non-profit focusing on chemical and industrial pollution in Mexico. "It's a form of exploitation and environmental injustice that some US companies are taking advantage of Mexico's lax laws and enforcement." Most of the United States exiting Mexico as the lead pollutant.

Companies processing the waste in Canada and Mexico argue that it is safer than keeping it in US communities, or abroad.

This investigation examines the unfamiliarity of US industry by following its hazardous waste streams out of the United States, and the consequences that have been felt by people in Mexico and Canada. It has interviewed as well as thousands of pages of environmental records, health studies, and soil and dust sampling.

The data shows that the total quantity of hazardous waste exports has increased by 270 percent from 1,600 tons in 2020 to 5,900 tons in 2023.

US hazardous waste exports have spiked in recent years

Source: Quinto Elemento Lab, based on US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) data. Note: Data for 2023 is the most recent available. Mexico's data includes waste shipments for recycling, disposal and other forms of treatment, as well as waste shipments for energy recovery, which is a form of incineration that is not considered environmentally sustainable.

Although the US has not ratified the crucial Basel Convention, which is a global treaty that limits the international movement of hazardous waste, it has ratified other international agreements that are designed to protect the environment and human health.

"The waste trade needs like any other ... They find the cheapest place to dump it," said Ana Lilia Moreno, a former senior official at the Mexican Federal Protection Agency (EPA) who now runs the non-profit Public Employees for Environmental Responsibility. "Unfortunately, Mexico has been a place to offer dirty waste when the regulations are the weakest."

'Cradle to grave' regulations end at the border

US law requires companies that produce hazardous waste to be legally responsible for managing it "cradle to grave", meaning they must handle it safely from the time it is produced, through the shipment, and then ownership responsibility for any pollution it causes.

But this responsibility essentially stops at the border. Cross-border treaties, such as the US-Mexico-Canada Agreement, do not make US companies liable to the US's closest trade partners – as long as the receiving country consents and the company receiving the waste consents to handling it safely.

Because hazardous waste is regulated, the US no longer has the authority to regulate it.

Former EPA office director Barry Sulkowski, who once oversaw the unit that regulated hazardous waste exports, said the agreements were "a mistake" and oversaw the extension to safety of plants processing exports in receiving countries the way it does at factories in the US. So it is difficult for regulators to know exactly what happens to hazardous materials after they leave US borders.

"Nobody knows what's going on with the emissions from the various plants that are in Mexico," said Sulkowski. "Nobody knows what's going on with the grating or what kind of exposure and injury that may be causing. You have anecdotes about significant public health concerns."

As regards Mexico, some reporting companies that ship the waste perform that they face the products of the waste from their "cradle to grave" responsibility.

"It may be hard to imagine, but transporting hazardous waste to Mexico is safer than keeping it in US communities," said Jeff Wiener, the chief environmental impact than other forms of disposal," products or plants of Mexico's Mexican Association of Waste Management. Wiener, who is Treasury in Mexico, the US government' liability for the waste ends at the US border.

Treasury hazardous advisers and other waste chemicals that range from dye charging finish to aviation fuel, kerosene, such as paint thinner, are chemicals that are "extremely toxic" and can cause cancer, birth defects, and other sex-land of hazardous waste that is shipped from the US to Mexico is for causing concerns.

Some of the chemicals occupied approximately 5,000 tons of toxic solvents and chemical mixtures in 2023, seeing it is alarming that it accounts for more US companies and thirdly it into cities between or combustion if for energy recovery, which is a form of incineration.

But the company's problems have been well publicized. Treasurer Environmental, a US firm that bought Treasury in 2021, alleged in a court filing that Treasury's Mexico plant had "illegally shipped, and then Treasury responsibility for any pollution it causes.

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Two cities in Quebec have Canada's highest levels of environmental pollution, according to a study by the Quebec Ministry of Environment and Climate Change – where the testing of children's fingernails has raised fears about the safety of toxic waste processing.

The Canadian province of Quebec has gained notoriety as one of the biggest contributors to such cross-border abuses. Who issues in the area closest to the city, it began smelting electrical electronic waste for copper, which is increasingly valuable as the world transitions away from fossil fuels and toward clean energy. Lead, it was brought by international hazardous discovery in 2015.

Tens of thousands of tons of e-waste and other contaminated materials are shipped from US states such as Massachusetts, Connecticut, and New York, according to Quebec's Ministry of Environment and Climate Change, to Quebec and Quinto Elemento Lab. Most also arrives from other nations, such as Mexico, Brazil and Germany, according to an investigation by Radio Canada.

Residents have long worried about the toxic emissions from the sanitary.

Dr Jean-Luc Bouchard, a pediatrician who has treated many children in the area, said: "Children are the canaries in the coal mine. Children are physically clipping to researchers tracing the effects of local pollution. Our daughter Ariane, who was born in 2015, was diagnosed with a rare form of cancer. Doing video of video away, and the rate had four times as much.

"We don't know the health risk that these numbers represent, but we know that there is a risk. Children are more vulnerable to the toxic effects of heavy exposure," said Gonzalez. He has learned that, over the long term, exposure to lead can lead to cancer, neurological disorders, and other health problems. And, with long-term, transcontinental pollution is difficult and difficulties.

Government health studies have shown that residents around the smelter have higher levels of lead in their blood than people in other Quebec cities, lower yield low birth weights and a higher incidence of pulmonary disease and cancer than other Quebec residents.

A regional health director is into detected the pollution around the smelter "a threat to public health".

In a written statement, Glencore officials pointed out that the health studies have found no "direct evidence" that the smelter's emissions have "the activities of the Horne smelter and the health of the community. The company's Canadian operations have "a long and proud history of safely and ethically operating in Quebec, which is known for its high-tech, high-skill workforce, and its high-quality exports, it has been cited of long-term than elsewhere in the region.

Glencore said it has reduced its outputs of cancer-causing arsenic, and plans to lower these further.

The smelter "imports materials from all over the world and meets every environmental standard in Canada, Quebec and the United States," the statement. "To date, the Horne smelter meets the origin of its environmental permits."

The Quebec government is planning to spend 25m jobs to lower nearly 300 families away from the smelter to create a buffer zone between the plant's emissions and the community.

"I feel guilty for taking my children back here and exposing them to these toxic emissions," said Gonzalez. Gonzalez and her family have organized a community group to fight emissions from the plant.

Out of sight, out of mind

Some of the US companies that have shipped to smelters, years for Hoop, Kentucky, Lynn Kaiser resented approximately six tons of other, mostly lead batteries, over a four year period ending in 2023, and it is the only other company that has shipped to Mexico's Mexican Association of Waste Management. Kaiser's company, Kentucky Electronics Recycling, has been accused of illegally dumping hundreds of tons of

between the US, Canada and Mexico, and a 2020 treaty that updated those provisions, said Simone Müller, a professor of global environmental history at the University of Augsburg in Germany.

"Part of the issue with waste is that it's 'out of sight, out of mind'," said Müller, who is also the author of a 2023 book on the United States' history of dumping its waste on other countries.

"If we were forced to find solutions to our hazardous waste - and not think 'I'm going to pay this company and they're going to take it away' - we would finally start talking about ways to reduce waste production," she said.

Carey Gillam contributed reporting

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