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## Environment Agency cracks down on illegal e-waste operators

**Liz Gyekye**  
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**The Environment Agency aims to tackle "the big, the bad and the nasty" key operators who illegally export waste electrical and electronic equipment from the UK to Africa by prosecuting them.**

EA policy advisor David Bradley told *MRW* that the EA currently has a large investigation running into the illegal WEEE exports from the UK to Africa which involves over a dozen operators and several large exporters in the e-waste sector.

Last month, the European Environment Agency released a report called *Waste without borders* that showed that illegal shipments of e-waste are on the increase and becoming a growing problem (see [MRW story](#)).

The export of e-waste from the European Union to African countries is prohibited, and non-governmental organisations report that disposal of this waste is damaging the environment and causing serious health problems for those employed in the disposal process. However, it is legal to export second hand electrical equipment.

Bradley said: "What we have done is set up a dedicated national team tackling the illegal export of WEEE, in particular, those destined for Africa. Countries such as **Ghana** and **Nigeria** come to mind. We are looking at upstream regulation and looking at the source of the material, where it has come from and where it is leaking from.

"We are trying to catch the illegal source early on. We are tackling the issue before the WEEE is exported and we are using an intelligence led approach, looking at the information gathered and target where the leakages are and arrest in some cases."

During 2006/2007 the EA prosecuted three companies for illegal WEEE exports to Asia, the Middle East and Eastern Europe. It has also stopped 33 shipments destined for export to Africa by issuing Stop Notices. Firms can incur costs from shipments being stopped. The project is ongoing and the focus is not just on illegal WEEE export but mixed waste exports that are not source segregated before they are sent abroad.

"I must admit it is a difficult problem to solve," added Bradley.

"There is large scale demand for WEEE and some operators are willing to cut corners and not comply with the rules. Recycling standards in some countries are lower than here. Until recently there was demand for some precious metals, from items such as computers, from some of these countries.

"We will not just carry out inspections and investigations. There will be much more strategic thinking about how we deal with illegal waste exports to stop it ending up in places where it should not."

The EA is also working with inspecting authorities throughout Europe and shipping lines to find out more information. It is also gathering intelligence across different sites.

Bradley said: "We anticipate that we are likely to prosecute some larger formal companies in the near future. But I cannot go into detail at this stage."

Picture: EA staff collecting used computer monitors

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