Ghana accuses UK recycling firm Environcom of illegal fridge imports

Country impounds huge shipment and claims British companies are using it as dumping ground for toxic old appliances

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A computer dump in Accra, Ghana, in 2009, since when the country has clamped down on the import of waste electrical goods. Photograph: Sipa Press/Rex Features

One of the UK's largest recycling companies has imported thousands of banned second-hand fridges into Ghana, according to the west African country's energy regulator.

Thousands of fridges discarded by British households have been shipped to Ghana by Environcom, which describes itself as the UK's largest electrical re-use and recycling company, flouting rules designed to protect the country's environment against harmful chemicals, according to the Ghanaian authorities.
"Environcom have sent a shipment of about 37 containers – almost 4,000 second-hand fridges – to Ghana," said Victor Owusu, public affairs spokesman for Ghana's energy commission.

Environcom has links to British retailers Dixons and Argos, which supply used appliances to the company for recycling. It admitted exporting the fridges to Ghana but said it did so before the ban came into place.

"Environcom stopped exporting fridges to Ghana some months ago in line with the introduction of the ban, however some containers that left us on time got delayed in transit and arrived in Ghana late and containers that were received prior to the ban were also impounded," said a company spokesperson.

The Guardian has seen documents which show the fridges were shipped from Britain to Ghana in August this year, almost two months after the ban came into force. Environcom says it sells second-hand fridges to third parties to ship to Ghana, and that it could not be held responsible for delays during the process.

The Guardian has seen an email exchange between Environcom and the Ghanaian authorities in which the company threatened to withdraw plans to invest in a recycling plant in the country if it was not allowed to import parts from second-hand fridges.

"Environcom have been working on a multimillion GBP investment in Ghana ... Your latest feedback has led us to question whether we withdraw from this project and look at alternative markets within west Africa," wrote Graeme Parkin from Environcom, in an email dated 21 June.

Environcom says it had been seeking to clarify the law in Ghana and was now working on a new agreement to invest in recycling facilities in the country.

There is increasing criticism of the practice of sending second-hand electrical goods to African countries, where many end up in toxic rubbish dumps scavenged by children and poisoning local environments.

A study by Greenpeace found that as much as 75% of "second-hand goods" imported to Africa could not be reused, and that in Ghana, goods that had been dumped were releasing hazardous substances into the environment, including toxic metal lead; chemicals such as the phthalates DEHP and DBP, which are known to interfere with sexual reproduction; and chlorinated dioxins known to promote cancer.
Second-hand fridges have been banned in Ghana since 1 January, after officials became increasingly concerned about the number of old electrical products no longer wanted by British households which were ending up in the country.

Ghana is the first country in the region to introduce a ban on old fridges, and officials hope it will reduce the quantities of toxic and ozone-unfriendly chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) and reduce the energy burden on its already squeezed national grid, where old fridges suck up more than half of the national energy output of 2,000 megawatts a year.

Ghanaian officials say numerous British companies are still importing second-hand fridges to Ghana in violation of the ban. "Since the ban came into force, we have made about 177 seizures of second-hand fridges," said Owusu. "Most of those have come from the UK – over 90% of the imports are coming from there. They know about the regulations, but they are errant companies that want to defy the law."

Environcom said discussions with the Ghanaian authorities about its impounded fridges were continuing. But Ghanaian officials said the shipment would be destroyed, and accused Britain of being the main exporter of unlawful second-hand electrical goods to the country.

"We are also determined that this ban of second-hand fridges into Ghana becomes a success story," said Owusu. "Now that energy is becoming so critical, who would allow their country to become a dumping ground for used refrigerators from the rest of the world?"

Environcom has come under the spotlight for sending second-hand electrical goods to Africa in the past.

Earlier this year company director Sean Feeney, a former senior Dixons executive, admitted Environcom had exported old-fashioned cathode-ray tube TVs to Africa when they became "hazardous" products, which could not be safely disposed of.

"In the past unscrupulous companies have used west Africa as a dumping ground," the Environcom spokesperson said. "In fact, when the new management came on board, Environcom stopped exporting refurbished TVs to Africa for many years because of the difficulties in controlling the end results and the impact on the local environment."

But as shipments of second-hand British fridges continue to arrive at its ports, Ghana said it would be making a complaint to the British government.
"We are going to file a complaint to the EU, and to the British high commission," Owusu said.

"I know that in the UK itself this kind of thing would not happen. I think they think it's Africa, so they can get away with it."