

In southwest Serbia, construction machines are being repurposed to [clear tons of waste](#) clogging the Potpec lake.

Year after year during the winter months, the lake near the southwest Serbian town of Priboj fills with tons of garbage such as plastic bottles, rusty barrels, dead animals and even furniture or home appliances.

That's because the [Lim river](#) feeding into the lake swells during the winter months and sweeps up trash from dozens of illegal landfills along its banks, as it flows from Montenegro to Serbia.

It's much the same in neighboring Bosnia's Drina river into which the Lim eventually flows. The problem spans decades and stems from poor waste management and a general lack of environmental protection safeguards across the Balkans.

Workers clearing the garbage with small cranes at the Potpec lake this week said the machines often break down because there is simply too much trash. Moreover, the cranes just weren't designed to pick up large chunks of wood or heavy washing machines from the water.

"You would not believe the things people throw into the river," said Milan Visic, a tugboat pilot. "It is in fact much better now than it was before because we cleaned up a lot."

The workers say they have collected some 10,000 cubic meters (more than 353,000 cubic feet) of waste since early December. But their job is far from over as much more **garbage** remains piled up in the lake.

Officials from Serbia, Bosnia and Montenegro have on several occasions pledged to work together to solve the problem affecting their shared rivers but little has been done in reality. All three countries are aspiring to join the [European Union](#) and are expected to do more for to protect their environment if their accession bids are to move forward. Another pressing issue is the extremely high level of [air pollution](#) affecting a number of cities in the region. The garbage problem is evident everywhere – piles of waste dot hills and valleys, trash lines roads and plastic bags twist from tree branches. Compounding the problem is that collected trash is simply dumped in a landfill and recyclables are hardly ever separated.

Environmental activists say tough action is needed now.

"For a start, heavy fines should be slapped," for throwing waste around, said Sinisa Lakovic of the local Jastrebo group, AP writes.