

Greece penalised for toxic waste

Andrew Osborn in Brussels

Greece's fledgling green credentials were in tatters last night after it was ordered to pay a daily fine of £14,000 for refusing to shut down a waste-disposal plant spewing toxic rubbish into a ravine 200 metres from the Mediterranean Sea.

The ruling of the European court of justice in Luxembourg has far-reaching consequences for other European Union countries, for it is the first time that the court has fined an EU member-state for refusing to comply with one of its judgments.

"We are stepping into new territory here.

"This is a landmark ruling and one of the most important judgements of the year," a court official said.

The decision is also a sign that the court is ready to get tough with countries which flout EU law, and that is likely to give a glimmer of hope to UK farmers relying on it to overturn France's ban on British beef.

The court ordered Greece to

close the plant, on the island of Crete, in 1992.

But opposition from the local authorities, who are loath to build a new plant near Chanlia, the local town, has prevented the order being obeyed.

The ruling is highly embarrassing to the Greek government, since the court found that waste from military bases, hospitals and local industry was still "thrown in an uncontrolled manner" into a ravine just 200 metres from the Mediterranean Sea.

The rubbish is constantly on fire and, every time it rains waste residues are swept into the sea and soak into the ground, damaging the environment.

Greek officials admitted yesterday that the ruling was likely to damage their country's environmental credentials, but were at pains to pin the blame on the local authorities in Crete.

"They are like the Sardinians and the Sicilians," one official said.

He claimed that the Cretan authorities had repeatedly re-

fused to bow to pressure from Athens, but would now have no choice but to fall into line.

"It is an embarrassment for the country but it is something we're trying to improve," the official said.

"We will have to comply with the decision and we will be paying the fine."

"The fine is quite steep so we'll have to get our act together very quickly."

Tourists should not, he added, be put off from visiting Crete, for it was still safe to swim in the Mediterranean.

But the European commission, which brought the case against Greece, took a stronger line yesterday and argued that the matter was extremely serious.

"It is very serious because it is about waste and toxic waste and ultimately the consumer's health," a commission spokeswoman, Pia Ahrenkilde, said.

The court's decision was a landmark ruling, Ms Ahrenkilde added.

It would serve as a deterrent against other countries which might be thinking of ignoring EU law.



The European court of justice has ordered Greece to close this toxic waste dump, near Chanlia on the Island of Crete, or face a daily fine of £14,000