



OLAF pivotal in uncovering a criminal network introducing hazardous waste from the UK to the EU

The European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF) played a key role in the Operation Dashboard that was executed by the Spanish Guardia Civil, uncovering a scrap yard in northern Spain which, by misdeclaring vehicles imports from the UK, was introducing hazardous waste into the EU. The facility, that was processing around 5,000 vehicles in total, was also failing to properly treat hazardous waste, such as air conditioning fluids, that pose serious environmental threats.

The Operation resulted in seven detainees and five individuals under investigation for charges that include alleged crimes against natural resources and the environment, falsification of certificates, money laundering, tax fraud, and membership in a criminal group.

OLAF was pivotal in the operation, establishing contacts with the corresponding authorities in the United Kingdom, France and Germany. Thanks to OLAF's close cooperation with HM Revenue & Customs in the United Kingdom, the country of origin of these vehicles, information exchanged helped to detect the fraud that was taking place in Spain, where the vehicles were being imported in an attempt to circumvent requirements as hazardous waste.

The vehicles were sold in parts on on-line sites. The investigation initially targeted servers of these website hosted in France and Germany. OLAF also roped in the support from the German Federal Criminal Police Office and the French authorities (*L'Office Central de Lutte contre les Atteintes à l'Environnement et à la Santé Publique*). Their assistance proved crucial in analysing the host servers and to reveal a diversionary manoeuvre intended to mislead investigators, as the servers were actually hosted in Spain.

Ville Itälä, OLAF Director-General, said: *"Once again, OLAF's ability to join the dots and bring national authorities together was essential to stop cross-border illicit schemes and movements. OLAF is best placed to facilitate this synergy and cooperation and we thank our partners for the successful collaboration that has demonstrated that with united efforts, we can combat illicit activities and protect citizens and our environment"*.

Guardia Civil estimated that since January 2021, 424 vehicles, over 600,000 kilos of scrap, arrived in Spain destined for this particular scrap yard. Multiple searches were carried out at homes, the scrap yard itself, and a warehouse, where numerous documents related to the operation were found and are currently being analysed.

Background

During the scrapping of vehicles, all residues such as oils, brake fluids and air conditioning fluids need to be treated properly due to their harmful impact on the environment. These fluids must be recovered and handled by authorised disposal plants.

These fluids (tetrafluoroethanes) become volatile upon contact with air and can have a 14-year atmospheric lifespan. Due to their characteristics this type of gas contribute to global warming and are also considered detrimental to human health.

OLAF mission, mandate and competences:

OLAF's mission is to detect, investigate and stop fraud with EU funds.

OLAF fulfils its mission by:

- carrying out independent investigations into fraud and corruption involving EU funds, so as to ensure that all EU taxpayers' money reaches projects that can create jobs and growth in Europe;
- contributing to strengthening citizens' trust in the EU Institutions by investigating serious misconduct by EU staff and members of the EU Institutions;
- developing a sound EU anti-fraud policy.

In its independent investigative function, OLAF can investigate matters relating to fraud, corruption and other offences affecting the EU financial interests concerning:

- all EU expenditure: the main spending categories are Structural Funds, agricultural policy and rural development funds, direct expenditure and external aid;
- some areas of EU revenue, mainly customs duties;
- suspicions of serious misconduct by EU staff and members of the EU institutions.

Once OLAF has completed its investigation, it is for the competent EU and national authorities to examine and decide on the follow-up of OLAF's recommendations. All persons concerned are presumed to be innocent until proven guilty in a competent national or EU court of law.

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