

OLAF investigation keeps dangerous hand sanitiser off the shelves

Almost 140,000 litres of hand sanitiser have been seized so far in the European Union thanks to information provided by the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF). The hand sanitiser originated from Turkey and contained dangerously high levels of methanol.

The use of hand sanitiser contaminated with methanol can cause headaches, blurred vision, nausea and vomiting, loss of coordination, and a decreased level of consciousness. Methanol has a direct toxic effect on the optic nerve, and ingestion can lead to blindness. Last August, OLAF received detailed information from Danish authorities concerning a seizure of 6,000 litres of hand sanitiser originating from Turkey. OLAF relayed the information to all EU Member States.

OLAF spotted a suspicious shipment to Ireland at the end of September and alerted Irish customs authorities. Irish authorities promptly intercepted the suspicious cargo in Dublin Port. Several samples analysed by the Irish Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) confirmed unacceptably high levels of methanol. The same happened with a second shipment. Through subsequent investigations with the freight forwarder, Irish authorities also discovered, detained and analysed older consignments of the hand sanitiser that were being kept in storage.

OLAF investigations discovered several companies in different EU Member States that ordered hand sanitisers from the same Turkish manufacturer and immediately informed the competent national authorities. In fact, the manufacturer in question operates under several names that OLAF managed to identify and link to each other. The company also manufactures on behalf of others. The names of the companies involved are covered by the confidentiality of ongoing investigations.

OLAF Director-General Ville Itälä said: 'Almost 140,000 litres have been seized by now; investigations in Member States are ongoing. This is an example of true teamwork between OLAF and the national authorities involved. Everyone put their expertise and operational capacity into a relay operation to protect Europeans. OLAF was pivotal. Since the onset of the pandemic, OLAF has been active in fighting illicit material related to COVID-19 such as counterfeit and substandard face masks, rapid tests, hand sanitisers. These products should protect people, not harm them. OLAF investigations have detected over 900 companies involved so far, and the list is growing.'

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.

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