

OLAF in operation against trafficking of endangered species

European eels are a critically endangered species and a prey to smugglers. The European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF) supported Europol-led Operation Lake, which led to the seizure of well over 1 tonne of glass eels from the hands of traffickers.

The sixth edition of Operation Lake ran from November 2021 to June 2022. OLAF joined Europol, the European Fisheries Control Agency and the European Commission's Directorate-General for Health and Food safety to help coordinate law enforcement authorities from 24 countries across the EU and beyond. OLAF worked closely with French Customs – as well as with all other partners.

Adults of European eels migrate from European rivers across the Atlantic to spawn in the Sargasso Sea near Bermuda. They die after spawning. The larvae drift back to Europe on the Gulf Stream to populate the rivers, lakes and estuaries of Europe and North Africa. On reaching the coast, they are transparent baby 'glass' eels before they start migrating up rivers where they grow into adults.

Eel stocks had been declining for a century or more. Illegal trade – particularly towards eel aquaculture plants in Asia, especially in China, where glass eels are considered a delicacy – is a major risk to the eel's recovery.

1,255 kilograms of glass eels were seized in this operation; 27,701 inspections were carried out all over Europe; 49 individuals were arrested. OLAF provided operational and technical support as well as a central point for the coordination of secure information exchanges.

OLAF Director-General Ville Itälä said: *"European eels have been a protected species in the EU for at least 15 years now, after stocks were decimated by over 90%. The illicit trade in eels endangers the recovery of the stock. OLAF has a long track record in the fight against contraband and trafficking, and I am glad we could apply our expertise to the protection of our wildlife. We became involved against the trafficking of eels fairly recently, after the European Commission made Europe a front-runner in environmental ambitions with its Green Deal, so it is great to see results already. Fraud that harms the environment is on the rise and we are working to put a halt to it."*

The following countries participated in Operation Lake: Albania, Austria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Bulgaria, Canada, Colombia, Czechia, Denmark, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Italy, Latvia, Luxembourg, Moldova, the Netherlands, Portugal, Slovakia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and the United States.

For more information, please see this [press release by Europol](#).

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.

For further details:

Jana CAPPELLO
Spokesperson
European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF)
Phone: +32 2 29 85549
E-mail: olaf-media@ec.europa.eu
http://ec.europa.eu/anti_fraud



Eirini NIKOLAIDOU
Deputy Spokesperson
European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF)
+32 2 29 83128
olaf-media@ec.europa.eu
http://ec.europa.eu/anti_fraud

