

OLAF awarded for its work against smuggling in climate-damaging gases

The European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF) is awarded the prestigious Montreal Protocol Award for Customs and Enforcement Officers in recognition for the strong commitment to address illicit trade in ozone-depleting substances and fluorinated global warming substances controlled under the Montreal Protocol. OLAF's operations in collaboration with its operational partners have led to the seizure and detention of almost 800 tonnes of illegal refrigerants over the past few years.

OLAF Director-General Ville Itälä said: *"Fighting the illicit trade in hydrofluorocarbons is an active contribution to protecting the environment and to the EU's ambitious climate goals to make Europe the first climate neutral continent by 2050. Tackling the illicit imports of HFCs has been an operation priority for OLAF for several years. Our cooperation with national, European and international authorities is key to the success of our operations and I am very honoured that our collective efforts have been recognised"*.

The gases used in refrigeration equipment are often HFCs - hydrofluorocarbons that were introduced as replacements for ozone-depleting substances. HFCs do not deplete the ozone layer but are potent greenhouse gases, often with a high global warming potential. To address this issue, an EU Regulation adopted in 2014 established a phase-down to progressively reduce the quantity of HFCs placed on the market. Criminal networks and other ill-intentioned actors tried to exploit the phase-down to generate opportunities for an illicit parallel trade.

Tackling this black market, especially the illegal imports of these gases into the EU, is an operational priority for OLAF. The environmental impact of illicit imports can be devastating. Preventing them from entering the EU market is part of OLAF's contribution to protecting citizens, the environment and legitimate trade. OLAF supports cross-border investigations and works closely with national and international authorities passing on tracking information and intelligence on suspicious shipments and operators to lead to significant seizures and detentions of illegal shipments.

OLAF received the award during the 5th edition of the ECA Montreal Protocol Awards for Customs and Enforcement Officers that was held virtually on 29 March 2023. Various national authorities and international organisations were awarded the Montreal Protocol Medal and Certificate during the event which included the participation of the World Customs Organization, the Ozone Secretariat and UNEP Law Division's OzonAction Programme.

Background

The global Montreal Protocol award for customs and enforcement officers is awarded by the UN Environment OzonAction, in cooperation with the World Customs Organization and the Ozone Secretariat. The award aims to provide recognition and encouragement to customs and enforcement officers and their respective organizations for successful prevention of illegal or unwanted trade of HCFCs / HFCs. The award is expected to enhance regional and international cooperation and awareness of the customs and enforcement community. It will facilitate reporting on illegal trade to UN Environment and the Ozone Secretariat.

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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