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Bait and switch: arrests in Italy in fraud case involving promotional items for fisheries

The Public Prosecutor of Rome has recently ordered house arrests and the seizure of over EUR 2 million in a fraud case concerning promotional services for fisheries and aquaculture products in Italy. The fraudulent scenario had originally been discovered by OLAF, in an investigation concluded in 2017.

OLAF had identified serious irregularities in a project regarding promotional services meant to raise awareness of fisheries and aquaculture products in Italy. The project, co-financed through the European Fishers Fund (EFF), was valued at almost EUR 2 million.

OLAF found evidence that the awarding process and the project implementation were not in compliance with the relevant legal provisions. OLAF also shed light on inadequate control and public procurement procedures, schedule and time-frame discrepancies, fictitious invoicing and faulty deliverables. Criminal misconduct was also suspected under the Italian Criminal Code, as OLAF discovered potential kick-backs at subcontracting level.

The matter was signalled to the Carabinieri Command Unit for Forest, Environment and Agrifood Protection in Italy. OLAF also addressed judicial recommendations to the Office of the Public Prosecutor of Rome.

The Public Prosecutor of Rome has since opened a criminal investigation, which led to house arrests and the seizure of more than €2 million euros from the owners of the Italian company managing the project. Judicial proceedings are underway.

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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