

Important role for OLAF in annual operation protecting European eels

For the first time, the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF) has played an important coordinating role in Operation Lake, the annual operation led by Europol targeting the trafficking of the protected European eel.

In its fifth year, [Operation Lake](#) involved law enforcement authorities from 23 countries and a number of EU-wide bodies, including OLAF. The European eel (*Anguilla Anguilla*) is a critically endangered species as a result of years of overfishing, with stocks estimated to have fallen by over 90% in recent years. Illegal trade in the eels, which are considered a delicacy in Asia, remains a real threat, however, and Operation Lake has become a vital weapon in the fight to protect eel stocks.

This was the first time that OLAF took part in Operation Lake, following an operational agreement with Europol in October 2020. OLAF's role was primarily coordinating with the French customs authorities in what was one of the widest anti-smuggling operations in French history. More than 20 French customs authorities from across the country took part in the operation, alongside French environmental protection authorities, with OLAF providing vital coordination support between these services, as well as the link with Europol.

OLAF also worked alongside other European Commission services, notably the Directorate-General for Health and Food Safety (DG SANTE) and its [Food Fraud Network](#), which carried out targeted inspections and checks at a number of suspicious businesses across the EU as part of the operation.

OLAF Director-General Ville Itälä said: *"I am proud that we were able to play an important coordinating role in this operation to protect one of Europe's most at-risk species. We have many years of experience working with customs authorities across the EU, and providing the vital link between the French authorities during Operation Lake underlines the importance of our recent agreement with Europol. I expect to see a significant increase in the number of cases and operations involving environmental and biodiversity issues in the years to come as OLAF plays its part in supporting the EU's commitment to tackling climate change and protecting the environment."*

More details about Operation Lake can be found in Europol's [press release](#).

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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