

OLAF Involved in Operation against Eel Trafficking



Thomas Wahl

News

As indicated in the activity report for 2020 (→ related link), OLAF's role in operations involving the environment and biodiversity, in particular the protection of endangered species, has increased in recent years. On 4 June 2021, OLAF informed the public that it participated, for the first time, in [Operation Lake](#). This annual operation, which started five years ago, targets the smuggling of the protected European eel. The stocks of this endangered species are estimated to have fallen by 90% in recent years and illicit trade with the eel is a very lucrative business, with profits estimated to be up to €3 billion.

Operation Lake V, which took place between November 2020 and June 2021, involved law enforcement and customs authorities in 16 EU Member States and 8 non-EU countries. Several EU authorities participated as well with Europol leading the operation. Criminal activities of networks mainly origin in France, Spain, Portugal and the United Kingdom – the four European countries producing glass eels. Concealed consignments are then shipped to destinations in Asia where the eel is considered a delicacy and high prices are paid.

OLAF's role consisted primarily in the coordination of the activities of the French customs authorities. The operation was one of the biggest anti-smuggling customs operations in French history involving 20 French customs authorities across the country.

Europol coordinated the overall operational activities, facilitated the information exchange and provided analytical support. During several action days, Europol deployed experts on the field to cross-check operational information in real time against Europol's databases.

In sum, Operation Lake V led to over 58,000 inspections, 52 arrest and the seizure of over 400 kg of eels valued at approximately €1.2 million. OLAF and Europol stressed that the operation is a vital weapon to fight illegal trade in European wildlife. The authorities also detected new *modi operandi* used by criminal networks for the eel trafficking.

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