

Fraud against the environment: OLAF and Spanish authorities bust traffic in illicit F-gases

The European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF) and the Spanish authorities dismantled a criminal organisation trafficking in illicit refrigerant gases, which are notoriously harmful for the climate. Operation Verbena led to the seizure of 27 tonnes of illicit refrigerant gases – also called F-gases or hydrofluorocarbons (HFCs) – and to the arrest of five people.

Operation Verbena was the biggest operation yet at EU-level against the trafficking of refrigerant gases. In addition to the 27 tonnes seized, investigations discovered 180 tonnes of illicit HFCs that were smuggled before the intervention of the Spanish authorities and OLAF. According to estimates, the criminal group is responsible for the emission of over 234,000 tonnes of carbon dioxide into the environment – that is roughly equivalent to a car driving all the way around the globe almost 9,000 times. Operation Verbena – which put a halt to these activities – was carried out by the Spanish Police and the Spanish Tax Agency, with support from OLAF.

HFCs are commonly used in refrigerated units and while importing them into the EU is allowed, given their significant carbon footprint imports are subject to strict quotas and regulations. According to investigations, the criminal group smuggled the gases into Spain from China by providing false information in the relevant customs documentation. The HFCs were then sold on to companies in Spain, Germany, France, Portugal and Senegal.

Ville Itälä, Director-General of OLAF, commented: *"As we have been witnessing with increasing frequency, fraud and smuggling can have collateral victims such as the environment or people's health and safety. OLAF has been working against illicit refrigerant gases for a few years now. A key element of our work is the cooperation with national authorities, with whom we continuously share our intelligence. I am pleased that we could support this successful operation by the Spanish authorities. Our cooperation with them has been, as ever, excellent and I would like to congratulate them on their results."*

More information is available (in Spanish) in the [press release of the Spanish Police](#). Video footage of the seizure for media use is also [available for download](#).

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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