

Pesticides worth up to € 80 million in criminal profits seized during operation Silver Axe VI



Between 13 January and 25 April 2021, Europol coordinated the sixth edition of operation Silver Axe targeting the trade in counterfeit and illegal pesticides. The joint action involved law enforcement authorities from 35 countries (all 27 EU Member States and 8 third party countries). The global operation was supported by the European Union Intellectual Property Office (EUIPO), the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF), the European Commission's DG SANTE, the European Crop Protection Association (ECPA) and CropLife Europe.

During the operation, law enforcement authorities targeted the sale of counterfeits, banned products and unregulated imports – both online and offline. They carried out inspections on land and sea borders, inland marketplaces, parcel service providers and online marketplaces. The abuse in the trade of illegal pesticides varies from trafficking counterfeit or mislabelled products to irregular imports of banned substances such as chlorpyrifos, which was specifically targeted during Silver Axe VI. While Asia and South Asia remain the major source regions for illegal pesticides, Europol has noticed an increase in their online sale.

Silver Axe VI resulted in:

- 12 arrests (7 in Italy and 5 in Spain);
- 763 infringements reported;
- 268 seizures, including:
 - 1 203 tonnes of illegal pesticides in total, including:
 - 100 tonnes of counterfeit pesticides seized at seller, manufacturer and logistics companies;
 - 82 tonnes of pesticides suspected of being counterfeited and currently under investigation.

Illegal pesticides carry a high environmental cost

The pesticide industry is highly regulated, and pesticides are among the most regulated products in the world. Unregulated substances can be extremely dangerous for the environment and human health. The use of cheaper illegal and substandard products has led to the devastation of fields and other ecosystems, which has caused serious harm to the world's biggest pollinators: bees. For example, a case during operational activities in the framework of Silver Axe IV uncovered how the unregulated use of neonicotinoid, contained in a non-approved product, led to the death of bees raised in the area. Although the trees that the product was used on did not have flowers, their leaves extracted sugar, attracting and poisoning the nearby bees.

Catherine De Bolle, Europol's Executive Director, said: "Over the past six years, Operation Silver Axe has brought together an increasing number of law enforcement authorities and partners against those putting our public health and security at risk. The impressive seizure of over 1 000 tonnes of illegal pesticides clearly demonstrate that, together, we can better ensure the safety of EU citizens and protect the environment today and for the future."

Christian Archambeau, EUIPO's Executive Director, said: "This is another example of how national and EU enforcement authorities and agencies working together can make a difference by taking off the market counterfeit, unregulated and often dangerous products that not only harm consumers but also have a deadly impact on the environment."

Ville Itälä, OLAF's Director-General, said: "OLAF is proud to have played its part in the ongoing fight against illegal pesticides. Our unique experience in identifying and monitoring suspicious shipments and activities has once again contributed to the excellent results of Operation Silver Axe, helping to keep these dangerous products off the EU market and protecting people and the planet."

Géraldine Kutas, CropLife Europe's Director-General, said: "Cooperation between industry and Europol on illicit pesticides is more vital than ever before. In order to deliver on the Farm 2 Fork objectives, we need to ensure there are no counterfeit and illegal pesticides entering the European market. To do this, we need to continue raising awareness for both farmers and the legitimate distribution channel to make sure they reject criminal offerings that jeopardise the sustainable production of food."

Total of 3 771 tonnes of illegal pesticides seized since Silver Axe I

Silver Axe was initially developed to respond in a coordinated way to the dangerous trafficking of illegal pesticides. The efforts of the public and private sector have led to the seizure of a total of 3 771 tonnes of illegal pesticides during the past six Silver Axe operations. Europol coordinated the operation, facilitated the information exchange and provided operational and

strategic analytical support.

Participating countries

EU Member States: Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Croatia, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, France, Finland, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, the Netherlands, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Slovak Republic, Slovenia, Sweden, Spain.

Third party countries: Australia, Brazil, Colombia, Switzerland, Ukraine, the United Kingdom, Norway and the United States.