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Covid-19: Dutch fishermen at the heart of massive public aid fraud?

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The environmental NGO Bloom transmitted "a report" to the European Public Prosecutor's Office to denounce "massive fraud on public subsidies" for the benefit of Dutch industrial fishermen supposed to have remained at the quay during the Covid-19 crisis. The association calls for the condemnation of the vessels concerned.



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Have Dutch fishermen taken advantage of the Covid-19 crisis to improperly receive public subsidies?

In any case, this is revealed by the environmental NGO Bloom, which investigated with the information site Médiapart.

"More than 95% of Dutch ships that received a Covid subsidy cheated to varying degrees and wrongly received 5.8 million euros between May 15, 2020 and December 3, 2020," says the association.

The investigation does not accuse all of these boats of having gone fishing at sea, but in many cases of having turned off a geolocation system that was supposed to remain on.

Bloom requests "the opening of a judicial investigation" by the European body for the fight against financial fraud within the European Union, to which she has transmitted the results of the investigations.

"French fishermen alerted us to the fact that Dutch fishermen were benefiting from temporary stops when they saw them at sea. So we did some research," Frédéric Le Manach, scientific director of Bloom, told AFP. .

Only 12 ships would have complied with the law out of 254 studied

Several European countries have granted aid to their sectors to enable fishermen who have remained at the quayside to bear the economic shock of the crisis.

In the Netherlands, the government has "excluded small-scale artisanal fishing (vessels under 12 meters) from its aid system" and "turned a blind eye to the fraud committed", denounces Bloom, who judges The Hague "accomplice".

Among 254 ships studied out of 269 having received a Covid subsidy, "only 12 ships fully complied with the law and therefore duly received these subsidies", according to the association.

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In order to justify their claims for compensation, the fishermen had to be able to prove their periods of temporary stoppage of seven consecutive days.

For this, they had a regulatory obligation to have their satellite monitoring system (VMS) on for the entire period covered by the temporary shutdowns.

A rule not always respected.

"The Dutch government serves the interests of industrial fishing"

Bloom calls for the condemnation of all ships that have "not complied with the shutdown periods" and the reimbursement of aid for all ships that have "not complied with the framework of the law by turning off their AIS (the geolocation)".

"For years, the Dutch government has served the interests of industrial fishing. We have already fought to obtain a ban on electric fishing (confirmed in 2021 by European justice, editor's note), practiced in the Netherlands on an experimental basis and devastating for the seas," said Claire Nouvian, president of Bloom.

Launched a year ago, the European Public Prosecutor's Office has enabled the seizure of 259 million euros and the opening of more than 900 investigations.

22 out of 27 member countries - including the Netherlands - participate in this judicial cooperation body.