


NGO Bloom questions impartiality of EU anti-fraud office over pulse fishing

By [Dan Gibson](#) Jan. 29, 2019 09:26 GMT



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Following two requests to the European Anti-Fraud Office (OLAF) to investigate a suspicion of fraud regarding the public funding of Dutch pulse fisheries, the environmental advocacy group Bloom has called into question the impartiality of the organization, and particularly that of its investigation into European structural funds.

Last year, Bloom released data indicating that Dutch pulse trawlers had received €21.5 million (\$24.5m) in public subsidies to support the development of pulse fishing, despite the fact that the country only had research licenses for 5% of its fleet -- and not the 84 vessels, or 30%, that currently utilize the equipment, it said.

Following the release, Bloom called on OLAF in June 2018, and again in November, to open an investigation into what it perceives as a fraudulent misuse of public funding.

In both instances, OLAF determined not to open an investigation, a decision which had not been communicated to the 23 co-applicants from NGOs and artisanal fishing organizations before it was ultimately leaked to the Dutch press on Jan. 18, Bloom said. "Given the clarity of the case of fraud, OLAF's conclusion is incomprehensible. But beyond that, their choice to communicate this decision, which is extremely beneficial to Dutch trawlers, only to the Dutch press necessarily raises questions on their neutrality," Frederic Le Manach, Bloom's scientific director, said in a press release.

In particular, Bloom and Le Manach have questioned the impartiality of Ernesto Bianchi, the man in charge of investigations into European structural funds at OLAF. Bianchi was formerly the head of the European Commission's fisheries department (DG MARE) from 2011 and 2015, when pulse fishing received the majority of its subsidies. Bloom has stipulated that Bianchi was one of those likely to have greenlit the funds, and would therefore not be an impartial investigator.

Furthermore, Bianchi's deputy at DG MARE from 2011 to 2015, the Dutchman Joost Paardekooper, had formerly been the Fisheries Attaché of the Netherlands to the European Union from 2005 to 2009, Bloom wrote.

In addition, Bianchi's unit has since merged with one headed by Elsa Roller, who the NGO claims has also taken multiple stances in favor of pulse fishing, as well as heading the unit that proposed an expansion in pulse fishing in 2014.

Bloom's chair, Claire Nouvian, has taken a dim view of proceedings.

"Dutch industrials and officials have implemented a perfect device to form public decisions according to their own agenda," she said in a statement. "It was all set for the perfect storm: the iniquitous, shameful, unacceptable decision to open the floodgates to a destructive fishery that never ceased to destroy the marine environment and the jobs of artisanal fishers."

In response to the claims, the anti-fraud office at OLAF denied that anything besides usual practice had taken place when investigating the accusations of fraud.

"OLAF conducted a preliminary analysis of the available information regarding allegations that EU funds for research and testing had been diverted into financing pulse fishing vessels or practice," a spokesperson at the OLAF press office told *Undercurrent News*.

"After this preliminary analysis, OLAF decided not to open an investigation as there was no verified suspicion that the EU funds for research or testing had been used for pulse fishing activities instead."

The organization stated that the preliminary analysis had been conducted by specialized experts who cover the initial allegations. Bianchi, as the head of one of OLAF's investigative directorates, does not take part in these preliminary proceedings, the office said.

"He has therefore not worked on the preliminary assessment in question here and has in no way been involved in the decision to dismiss this assessment. OLAF strongly rejects any allegations of lack of impartiality," the spokesperson told *Undercurrent*.

What next?

While the EU Parliament formally voted to ban the controversial pulse fishing practice on Jan. 16, 2018, no agreement on a ban has yet been reached with the other branches of the EU trilogue.

There are now just a few weeks left before the European Parliament's final plenary session on April 15, after which it will dissolve. Failure to reach an agreement for a pulse fishing ban by that date would mean an indefinite postponement while European elections take place and a new commission is formed.

[On Jan. 21, Bloom and other artisanal fishers met in Boulogne-sur-Mer, France](#), to ask EU institutions to support the compromise proposal currently under negotiation, which would make it possible to prohibit electric fishing by July 31, 2019.