

Workshop on the illegal importation of wild meat Brussels, 12th December 2024



CONFERENCE REPORT

The workshop on the illegal importation of wild meat took place in Brussels, on 12th December 2024, and was organized by the Belgian Federal Public Service Health, Food Chain Safety and Environment, the Royal Institute of Natural Sciences, WWF France and TRAFFIC.

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The event brought together around 60 representatives of French and Belgian public authorities, including customs officers, animal and human health border control agents and civil aviation authorities, scientific institutions, the air transport sector with a participation of Air France, Brussels airlines, Brussels Airport and IATA, civil society and academia. It was a first cross-border forum for the exchange of views and experiences on how to understand the current characteristics associated to the illegal importation of wild meat, including One Health risks. It also aimed to develop recommendations for concrete and effective strategies and actions to help address challenges posed by the illegal importation of wild meat at the national level.

This report summarizes the workshop presentations and provides outcomes of the discussions made during the breakout session which resulted in 11 priority recommendations for policy-makers and the air transport sector.

Morning – summary of presentations

Keynote speech from Mr. Pierre Kerkhofs, Director general, DG ENV, FPS Health, Food Chain Safety and Environment

WWF France & TRAFFIC - Overview of the scale and characteristics of the illegal wild meat trade (Lorélie Escot & Justine Guiny)

The illegal bushmeat trade poses significant challenges at the intersection of health, conservation, and development, particularly in its connection to Europe. Europe has become a significant destination, with illegal imports often originating from countries like Cameroon, Congo, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Côte d'Ivoire, and entering through major airports in Paris, Brussels, Zurich, and Geneva. Annual estimates suggest imports of 273 tonnes through Paris airports and 46 tonnes through Brussels.

The trade carries substantial public health risks, including the import of zoonotic diseases. Conservation concerns are equally pressing, with the trade threatening wildlife populations, particularly CITES-listed species (e.g. species of primates and pangolins), which constitute a third of reported seizures. To mitigate these issues, a One Health Approach is crucial, addressing the interconnected health of humans, animals, and the environment.

Efforts to monitor, control, and investigate the trade face significant obstacles. European authorities cite limited resources, weak regulations, and insufficient cross-border cooperation as major challenges. To address these gaps, key priorities include mapping supply chains, assessing

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disease risks, enhancing enforcement capabilities and reducing demand. This requires a multi-sectoral approach that involves governments, NGOs and researchers, as well as to work with target stakeholder groups (e.g. transport companies, consumers). Existing laws and policy frameworks (e.g. the European Food Law such as EU Regulation 2019/625, the EU Wildlife Trade Regulations, the EU Action Plan Against Wildlife Trafficking) should also be leveraged to facilitate enforcement.

TRAFFIC and WWF developed a dedicated program aimed to strengthen strategies to tackle the Central Africa-to-Europe bushmeat trade, ensuring safer, sustainable, and legal wildlife trade practices, through multistakeholder cooperation.

FPS Public Health, Food Chain Safety and Environment - The Belgian draft action plan to combat the illegal importation and consumption of wild meat (Maud Istasse)

Belgium is developing a [national One health action plan](#) on the trade in exotic species, including wild meat. A National Task Force on Sustainable Wildlife Trade has been established to draft the plan with the aim to combat the illegal importation and consumption of wild meat. This work is informed by national studies and scientific recommendations. A 2019 study commissioned by the FPS Public health estimated that 3.7 tonnes of bushmeat, including 30% of CITES-listed species, are illegally imported through Brussels Airport each month.

This trade raises significant environmental, health, and conservation concerns, including at the national level. The part of plan on the illegal meat trade features 22 actions that are structured around five main axes: gaining knowledge through continuous data collection, enhancing controls and enforcement, prosecuting offenders, raising awareness, and fostering international collaboration. The central pillar is to set up efficient border controls enforcement by allocating appropriate financial, legal, scientific and human resources, and introduce proportionate penalties.

A public consultation in 2023 and the outcome of the workshop will help refine the draft actions, with a final version expected in 2025. These efforts underscore Belgium's commitment to addressing the risks associated with the illegal wild meat trade while fostering sustainable wildlife management practices.

DGDDI France - Illegal imports of wild meat in travelers' luggage (Benjamin Baud)

Efforts to combat the illegal importation of wild meat in travelers' luggage have intensified, driven by the General Directorate of Customs and Excise (DGDDI) in France. The DGDDI is a department of the Ministry for the Economy, Finance and Industrial and digital sovereignty tasked with regulation and control of foreign trade operations, supporting economic competitiveness of businesses, implementing measures to protect public health and safety, taxation and border controls.

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Over the past five years, customs have seized an average of 23 tonnes of illegal meat annually, including 600 kg from wild species such as monkey, pangolin, and bat. However, this is likely an underestimation due to identification challenges of CITES species.

To address the problem, a multidisciplinary interministerial working group on illegal wild meat in travelers' luggage was established in 2023 with the aim of developing an action plan including 4 lines of work. A significant focus is on increasing passenger awareness and target controls, strengthening cooperation with source and consignment countries, refining regulations, including at the EU level, and experimenting with new control tools.

An awareness-raising campaign targeted at travelers was developed in 2024 at Lyon's St. Exupéry with an exhibition, videos, and multilingual posters. Partnerships, environmental organizations, and other government bodies have been key.

Studies at Roissy Airport have highlighted an increase in the illegal wild meat imports, linked to expanded air traffic. Efforts are underway to quantify these flows by species, trace origins, and assess pathogen risks. Regulatory changes are also being pursued, aiming at appropriately sanctioning passengers in the event of infringements, and at putting in place a simplified and effective legal regime to ban meat imports by passengers at the EU level, in particular by working on the exceptions that are currently too numerous and prove counterproductive.

Through these initiatives, France seeks to mitigate public health, biodiversity, and economic security risks associated with the illegal wild meat trade, with enhancing public awareness and efficient regulatory frameworks.

DGAC France - Initiatives with airlines and foreign authorities (*Morgan Verin*)

Facilitation of air transport, a part of the French DGAC (Direction générale de l'aviation civile) / CAA (French Civil Aviation Authority), is guided by ICAO's Annex 9 of the Chicago Convention and handles various topics, including the fight against wildlife trafficking. This involves collaboration with a number of state actors (Ministry of Transport, Health, Internal Affairs, Customs) as well as the private sector (airports, airlines, and ground handlers).

With several million air passengers traveling on international flights every day, streamlined border controls and passenger management are critical to prevent congestion, enhance security, and reduce delays. Through facilitation, ICAO's role is to promote measures enabling the implementation of common rules to facilitate the movement of aircraft, people and freight. Airports are key to anti-bushmeat trafficking efforts, with nearly 90% of seizures occurring there. The airline industry, through associations like IATA and ACI, is increasingly mobilizing to address wildlife trafficking.

Despite challenges related to highly competitive sector, lack of coercion, property rights in implementing measures such as luggage screening and passenger statement on honour, progress is underway. In spring 2024, the French CAA and Customs have engaged with foreign airlines transporting passengers from high-risk countries to evaluate their practices and share

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awareness materials, such as posters and videos, for display at departure stations. Following these exchanges, some companies immediately made a link to the French customs website.

France also succeeded to innovatively introduce specific species protection clauses, including on wild meat, in bilateral air agreements with Cameroon and Ethiopia. Future steps may include amending Annex 9 of the ICAO to strengthen recommendations against wildlife trafficking, including wild meat. Coordinated efforts aiming to enhance enforcement, awareness, and collaboration in the fight against illegal species trade will also be broadened in the future to more airlines and countries.

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RBINS – The scale of exotic (wild) meat import into Belgium: Findings from the INTERCEPT project (*Laura Cuypers*)

The [INTERCEPT project](#) (Monitoring the trade in exotic animals, wild meat and the pathogens they carry) investigates the scale and impact of exotic wild meat imports into Belgium, focusing on conservation and public health risks. The objective of the INTERCEPT project is to chart the current situation in Belgium (frequency of legal and illegal import), to construct a centralized database and to sample confiscated meat for identification.

The European Union prohibits the importation of meat in personal consignments of passengers. To enforce the regulation, Belgian customs conduct routine controls as well as regular targeted controls together with the Federal Agency for the Safety of the Food Chain (e.g., BaCon actions). In accordance with the applicable EU regulation, confiscated meat from passenger's luggage is automatically destroyed with no further species identification except for when there is suspicion of a CITES species. Seizures data are recorded by customs, the FASFC, Saniport (FPS Health) and the CITES unit of the FPS Health (the last one, in the EU-TWIX database for CITES species), but not in a coordinated, integrated and digital manner, which prevent a comprehensive understanding of the situation.

From 625 meat specimens confiscated and sampled under INTERCEPT, DNA analysis identified 514 at least at the genus level, revealing that 17-26% were wild meat, including 11 CITES-protected species. However, scattered, incomplete, and non-digitized data across agencies hinder precise assessment of the scale of illegal wild meat imports via Brussels Airport.

Regular checks for species identification should be put in place by authorities in the long-term, more training is needed to e.g. enable staff to identify common wild species based on visual cues, and sampling efforts should duly be recorded.

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RBINS - Diverse pathogens in animals involved in the wild meat trade: implications for public health (INTERCEPT) *(Sophie Gryseels)*

The INTERCEPT project also investigates the public health risks posed by the illegal wild meat trade, emphasizing its role in zoonotic disease transmission. Wild animals harbor a vast diversity of pathogens, including viruses, bacteria, and parasites, some of which can spill over to humans, leading to epidemics or pandemics. Many emerging infectious diseases originated from wildlife, with the wild meat trade being a significant driver of zoonotic spillover events.

Zoonotic risks are compounded by the high pathogen diversity found in animals involved in the wild meat chain. Metagenomic analyses of confiscated samples in Belgium and the Democratic Republic of Congo revealed numerous viruses, including potential zoonotic strains. These analyses underscores the need for unbiased pathogen detection methods, such as metagenomic sequencing, to identify both known and unknown viruses in wild meat.

The INTERCEPT project will test the largest set of wild meat samples for an unbiased screening of viruses and bacteria (metagenomic screening). This research will be essential to assess the real risks of importing dangerous pathogens and to understand the variations in risks associated with different mammal species, geographic origins, wild or domestic animals and meat preparation methods.

Wild mammals involved in the wild meat trade harbor a diverse array of viruses, many still unknown. Primates pose the highest risk because their viruses are most likely to be able to infect closely related humans. Although these viruses travel with their hosts, cooking generally renders them non-viable. Further research is essential to accurately assess the risks of importing harmful pathogens.

Air France – Private sector engagement against the illegal wild meat trade: the Air France example in raising-awareness and communicating towards its staff and customers *(Marie-Pierre Pernet)*

Air France has adopted several measures aimed to tackle wild meat trafficking. Some of the actions are the result of an interprofessional working group, established in 2017 following Air France-KLM's signing of the Buckingham Palace Declaration. The group has collaborated with private actors, public bodies, and NGOs like WWF to create an inclusive and diverse platform for tackling wildlife trafficking.

Because an airline is not authorized to inspect the baggage of its customers, Air France has focused on raising awareness among customers and staff. Actions include:

- Customer Communication: Videos, posters, webpages on prohibited items, and emails inform passengers about wildlife regulations at multiple stages, from booking to boarding. A key new feature is a check-in process at six African stations where staff ask customers to confirm they are not transporting perishable prohibited goods.

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- **Staff Training:** A bilingual, 34-minute training module co-designed with WWF educates staff on wildlife trafficking, complemented by reference materials to assist with customer inquiries.
- **Operational Procedures:** Staff are trained to detect signs of trafficking, such as unusual baggage noises or smells.

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In the future, Air France plans to include an expansion of the check-in questioning process to the online check-in process, to update flight crew documents, and to develop articles for publication in Air France's travel magazine.

Air France emphasizes collaboration, aligning efforts with customs, NGOs, and airport stakeholders to ensure collective progress. However, the company insists on the need to fight against traffic simultaneously by all actors at all airports in Europe and in the world to avoid diversion of traffic routes. Despite these challenges, Air France-KLM remains committed to playing its part in stopping wildlife trafficking within its scope of responsibility.

Afternoon – summary of break-out sessions

Three different breakout groups were set up, and were composed of a mix of experts from different fields (environmental/customs/sanitary public authorities, NGO's, academics, country representatives, private sector).

The objective of these breakout sessions was to create an opportunity for all participants to actively discuss topics related to the illegal trade in wild meat, with a focus on concrete actions to be operationalized as a priority. The draft Belgian action plan served as a basis for the discussions, offering possibilities to brainstorm on similar issues in Belgium and other neighboring countries such as France.

These breakout sessions have resulted in several recommendations that will serve Belgium and other neighboring countries to tackle the illegal trade in wild meat at their national level and increase cooperation between these countries. They offer tailored-made solutions at country level when appropriate.

These recommendations will also feed into the priority process to be carried out at Belgian level as part of the finalization of a draft action plan in the trade of exotic animals, which includes a large part dedicated to tackling the illegal trade in wild meat. In this regard, the outcome of these sessions should help Belgium to assess which actions are still valid, which actions need finetuning or an update, and how they can be prioritized.

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Group 1: Knowledge, data collection and research, including pathogens

Communication and information sharing

Effective communication among the law enforcement agencies involved in monitoring the illegal meat imports is currently a significant strength. However, there is room for improvement in information sharing between law enforcement actors among themselves, but also with airlines. For example, coordination on issues like luggage destruction could be hampered by privacy concerns. Recording data from transferring/connecting flights has been improved, but there remains room for further optimization. **A centralized database on wild meat imports should be developed to facilitate and enhance information sharing among the different actors involved. Ideally, this database should be on the European level. However, a national database would offer a quicker, practical solution.**

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Challenges in Screening for Meat Imports

Screening for meat imports presents substantial logistical challenges, as current reliance on scanners may be insufficient. More thorough checks on fewer flights, including opening each piece of luggage, could enhance screening effectiveness. Additionally, employing trained sniffer dogs, as exemplified by the Czech Republic's use of a CITES sniffer dog, could provide a complementary approach despite certain limitations. Randomizing passenger selection, such as screening every n^{th} passenger instead of relying on subjective profiling, could further improve fairness and efficiency. It would also provide a less biased sample of the passenger population, therefore allowing to scientifically extrapolate the frequency of wild meat found in luggage to the entire population.

Moreover, custom officers can benefit from a standardized protocol when they find meat in the passengers luggage to improve data collection. This could for example be taking a picture of the confiscated meat or rapid test for pathogen detection. **There is an urgent need for a standardized protocol for species identification and sampling.**

Biosecurity measures

Several airline industry professionals are at risk from illegal imported meat. Passengers and border control personnel face direct exposure to potential pathogens, while other airport staff might also encounter risks. Although gloves are provided to border control personnel in Belgium, the lack of face masks, overalls, and biosafety training leaves them vulnerable. Repeated and continued use of tools like knives (when opening luggage) and nitril gloves when contaminated with animal blood and other tissues, without regular disinfection, poses a particular risk of pathogen transmission. Without overalls and other personal protection equipment (PPE), personal clothes and items (such as cellphones) are at high risk of animal blood and tissue contamination.

A biosafety protocol with appropriate personal protection material and biosafety training would decrease the risk of airport personnel and border control agents to potential pathogens.

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Pathogen Monitoring Protocols

The design of effective pathogen monitoring protocols is inherently challenging, as sampling methods significantly influence detection outcomes. Strategic adjustments to sampling practices could improve detection rates and provide more reliable data.

Sensibilization to consumers

Sensitization efforts play a vital role in mitigating risks. Air France's awareness campaigns serve as an exemplary model, demonstrating how stakeholders can be effectively engaged. Expanding such efforts to reach consumers, particularly through diaspora ambassadors, could bridge cultural and communication gaps and further enhance awareness.

Group 2: Control & enforcement

The discussion took place on three key legal features linked to control & enforcement: legislation, procedures and effective judiciary support (more specifically from public prosecutors). Legislation is crucial as it forms the basis for any effective control and possible subsequent prosecution and sanctions.

Legislation and sanctions

A national legislation should be put in place that provides a comprehensive penalty system that includes non-CITES wild meat. Currently only infringements linked to CITES species is being regarded by legislation, which does not make sense from a criminality policy perspective. This way, anyone who brings illegal meat into Belgium would be equally punishable. On the long term, it is crucial to engage with judiciary and the public prosecutors to reflect on pending legal issues (notably recidivism) in order to set up a balanced legal system, with appropriate and dissuasive sanctions, against the illegal wild meat trade.

Applicable European legislation needs to be simplified (*Commission Delegated Regulation (EU) 2019/2122 of 10 October 2019 supplementing Regulation (EU) 2017/625 of the European Parliament and of the Council as regards certain categories of animals and goods exempted from official controls at border control posts, specific controls on passengers' personal luggage and on small consignments of goods sent to natural persons which are not intended to be placed on the market and amending Commission Regulation (EU) No 142/2011*). Currently there are too many exceptions, which makes the fieldwork for controls very complex and more difficult to execute. It is proposed to remove all exceptions that are currently in force. Furthermore, we need to look at other countries (for example Australia) to see what can be done in terms of biosecurity regime for food.

Procedures

Procedures applicable for controls should move beyond problems such as the complexity of identifying species from the seized meat. Border controls forces need to have the capacity to apply a rapid and easy sample procedure. **On the short term, basic sample procedures should**

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be put in place that border control agents could easily use in an efficient way, and these procedures should take the findings of the Intercept project into account. On the long term, it is recommended to invest in procedures with the best advanced scientific technique such as rapid DNA-identification.

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Group 3: Engagement and cooperation with the air transport

Actions the Private Sector Can Independently Adopt and Implement

One of the key challenges is improving collaboration, communication and awareness. **Training programs for staff and enhanced resources from stakeholders are crucial.** Air France's initiative is an excellent example (see presentation). Air France has collaborated with DGAC, Paris Charles De Gaulle airport and WWF, because their efforts depend on access to accurate and actionable information from these stakeholders. Air France worked closely with DGAC to create pictograms and clear wording for informational sheets. Involving DGAC made it easier for Air France to put this topic on the agenda of top management. Reciprocally, Air France's interest in this topic, allowed DGAC to put this topic on their own agenda.

Participants to the breakout discussion underscored the importance to have access to **“ready-to-use” and “targeted”** (e.g. crew- vs. ground staff-specific) **materials**. They also highlighted the relevance to **replicating messages along the passengers' pathways** (see Air France's presentation as an example) and over the years.

In Belgium, Brussels Airport could be positioned as a liaison among various stakeholders, including airlines and administrative bodies, to facilitate better coordination. However, Brussels Airport currently lacks resources to start these initiatives.

Inconsistent legislation across member states poses challenges. For example, passengers might bypass stricter customs at Brussels Airport in favor of destinations with more lenient regulations, before continuing their journey by train. **A harmonized EU approach is essential to address these disparities.**

Standardized practices, greater cooperation, and a cross-disciplinary approach—led by organizations like ICAO—are needed to align policies and elevate the issue of wildlife trafficking across the aviation sector by setting standards.

Actions Government Agencies Can Implement to Engage or Support the Private Sector

Tackling the illegal wild meat trade at its source requires addressing political challenges, as many origin countries lack awareness of the issue's impact. Clear communication is essential to clarify regulations, supported by coordinated resources and an EU-wide approach. **There was agreement that existing fora and cooperation mechanisms should include this topic to their agenda and that establishing an interministerial working group in destination countries, including foreign affairs ministries, may help deal with this complex issue.**

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Bilateral agreements and streamlined communication **through a single EU civil aviation spokesperson could enhance collaboration. Amending ICAO's Annex 9, informed by public and private sector recommendations, would help set industry standards that influence source countries.**

Overview of recommendations

Recommendation	Description	From breakout group	Term
A centralized database on national/European level	Facilitate and enhance data sharing among actors	Knowledge, data collection & research	Short/Long
Standardized protocols for sampling	Easy to use and efficient sampling procedures for border control agents	Knowledge, data collection & research	Short
Advanced techniques for species identification	Standardized protocols for species identification with the newest scientific techniques for fast DNA identification	Knowledge, data collection & research/ Control & Enforcement	Long
Enhanced biosafety for personnel	A biosafety protocol with appropriate personal protection and training programs for personnel	Knowledge, data collection & research	Short
National legislation with penalty system for non-CITES species	Anyone bringing illegal wild meat into the country should be punishable	Control & Enforcement	Short
Development of a balanced legal system	Engage with judiciary and the public prosecutors to reflect on pending legal issues	Control & Enforcement	Long
Simplifying applicable EU laws	Remove all exceptions from the applicable EU laws	Control & Enforcement	Long
Training programs for staff and enhanced resources from stakeholders	Improve collaboration, communication and awareness between stakeholders. Need for 'ready to use' and 'targeted' material	Engagement private sector	Short

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A harmonized EU approach	Standardized practices, greater cooperation, and a cross-disciplinary approach are needed to align policies	Engagement private sector	Long
Establishment of an interministerial working group	Establishment of an interministerial working group, including foreign affairs ministries, is critical to enhancing cooperation and concerted action	Engagement private sector	Short
Amending Annex 9 of the ICAO	Amending Annex 9, informed by public and private sector recommendations, would help set industry standards that influence source countries.	Engagement private sector	Long