World Customs Organization

Patterns of Illegal Trade in Controlled Substances

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Overview of Patterns of Illegal Trade in Controlled Substances

- Illegal trade in substances controlled under the Montreal Protocol continues despite existing regulatory measures.

- Data from Parties reported to the Ozone Secretariat, Customs detections reported to the WCO, information from national authorities, and other available sources illustrate common types and methods of illegal trade, key trends, and enforcement challenges.

- The full scale of illegal trade remains uncertain.

Insights from Ozone Secretariat Data

- Since 2002, Parties have reported 786 cases of illegal trade in controlled substances (as of 17 April 2025; see UNEP/OzL.Pro.WG.1/47/5).
- The main methods of illegal trade included trade without licenses or quota, misdeclaration, mislabeling, and smuggling.
- Most detections resulted from random checks, physical inspections, and documentary checks, with Customs authorities playing a key role.
- HFCs were involved in most of the reported detentions.
- A limited number of Parties accounted for most of the reported cases.

Insights from WCO Operation DEMETER series

- Illegal trade in controlled substances and related equipment remains a global challenge, as demonstrated by 158 seizures reported by 19 WCO Members across operations DEMETER VIII–X.
- Seizures and volumes have increased across successive operations:
  - DEMETER VIII (2022): 13 seizures (≈25 tons of substances),
  - DEMETER IX (2023): 46 seizures, including 9 seizures of equipment, (≈130 tons of substances),
  - DEMETER X (2024): 99 seizures, including 27 seizures of equipment, (≈345 tons of substances).
- Cross-border movements involved 39 departure points, 33 destinations, and 25 transit spots. HFCs were involved in most of the reported detentions.
- Detection relied primarily on frontline inspections: routine inspections and random checks.

Patterns and Enforcement Implications

Data from the Ozone Secretariat and the WCO, as presented, together with information collected or observed by national authorities, as well as agencies and organizations supporting enforcement against illegal trade in controlled substances (such as OLAF, Europol, EIA), indicate the following:

- Illegal Trade Patterns: Lack of licenses or quota allocations, misdeclaration, mislabelling, and smuggling, detected mainly through documentary and physical inspections, as well as targeted enforcement operations and investigations.

- Limited Reporting in Global Contexts: Global operations and international submissions involve data from a relatively small number of countries.

- Enforcement Needs Targeting: Effective enforcement requires enhanced risk profiling, intelligence-led operations, and stronger cross-border cooperation.

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Thank you!

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