



2024

Highlights report

**National Scientific Secretariat
on Invasive Alien Species**
Belgium

Foreword

The EU Regulation no 1143/2014 on Invasive Alien Species (IAS) – the IAS regulation – entered into force in 2016 with the adoption of the first list of species of Union concern.

To ensure the IAS regulation is implemented in a coordinated way in Belgium, a cooperation agreement between the Federal State, the Communities and the Regions entered into force in 2019. The founding of the National Scientific Secretariat on Invasive Alien Species (NSSIAS) is a direct result of this cooperation agreement.

The main missions of the NSSIAS are to ensure the scientific expertise needed for the coordinated implementation of the EU Regulation in Belgium, to streamline the workflow between the different entities, to provide the Scientific Council with support in responding to the National Committee's IAS-related scientific advice and to support official controls at the border. Additionally, the NSSIAS has been temporarily mandated to engage with stakeholders to set up codes of conduct for several recreational and professional sectors in the framework of the national action plan to prevent the unintentional introduction and spread of IAS.

This highlights report gives an overview of the main projects and tasks conducted by the NSSIAS in 2024.

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A word from the Belgian IAS Committee



In 2023 and 2024, I had the pleasure of chairing the National IAS Committee for the first time as a representative of the federal authority. Despite the apparent formality of the role, it was through the positive attitude, dedication, and motivation of all the members of the National IAS Committee that we were able to make progress in the fight against invasive alien species.

It is with great confidence that I passed the baton to my colleague from Flanders, Nicolas Pardon, at the end of last December, for the next two years.

Maud Istasse

FPS Environment

Chairman of the Belgian National IAS Committee (2023-2024)

OUR TEAM



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Support to inspection

The NSSIAS is charged with offering scientific support to Belgian inspection services to identify IAS of the Union list during controls and to coordinate their implementation. Several actions were undertaken in that framework in 2024.

EU conference on official controls for IAS at the border



The FPS Environment - supported by IUCN and the European Commission - organized a conference on IAS in March 2024 in the framework of the Belgian presidency of the Council of the EU. Officers from customs, animal and plant health authorities, and environmental authorities from 18 Member States convened in Brussels for a one day event focusing on improving border controls for IAS. At the end of the day, the **main challenges and needs of all stages of the control process** were identified, and five priorities were formulated. NSSIAS was in charge of developing the plenary session, presenting the Belgian approach of supporting inspection services, and supporting the IUCN in setting the framework for the breakout sessions.

Consult the conference report [here](#)



Identification video on crayfish

Crayfish are notoriously hard to identify. To support professionals and enthusiasts alike, we have developed a video on the identification of crayfish. It goes beyond the species of Union Concern and focuses on **12 species** that are present in trade and/or in nature and a few look-a-likes.

Discover the video in [NL](#) or in [FR](#)

Coordination of controls in shops

Following the establishment of a framework for a regionally coordinated strategy for controls in shops in 2023, the NSSIAS assisted the inspection services in the implementation of the strategy for 2024.. More specifically, the NSSIAS 1) produced a strategic note on coordinated inspections, 2) detailed **guidelines for seizing and disposal** of crayfish and aquatic plants, and 3) organized a debriefing meeting for the regional inspection services at which the inspectors of the FPS Environment were also present to stimulate exchanges.

Rapid response and management

COORDINATION FRAMEWORK FOR MANAGEMENT

According to the cooperation agreement and a follow-up ministerial decision (ICE 29/3/2022), Belgian authorities need to **coordinate the management of IAS of Union Concern**. The NSSIAS coordinated and facilitated the process of setting up a framework for management coordination. Species are divided into groups according to their status on the BE territory, proximity of populations to regional boundaries and previous experience with management of the species. For every group, it details the level of coordination and frequency of informational exchange and for every species, it outlines a **current management objective**.



CONTINGENCY PLAN

How do the authorities need to respond when a listed species that was previously unknown for the Belgian territory is detected? A contingency plan is a playbook for such an event describing all administrative steps, resources and technical details. It needs to be ready to go in such an event. The NSSIAS drafted the **first contingency plan on IAS in Belgium for flatworm species**, in the framework of the citizen science project FlatwormWatch.

[Consult the contingency plan here](#)

Outreach

GUIDE FOR SCIENTISTS

The National Scientific Council on IAS has produced a guidance document for scientists in Belgium on the EU Regulation 1143/2014 on IAS. The document summarizes the **best practices for researchers** when dealing with IAS and highlights the obligations linked to the EU Regulation, such as reporting of observations and use of permits. It is aimed at scientists who 1) conduct research on IAS, 2) work with laboratory animals or 3) carry out fieldwork in Belgium.

[Download the guide here](#)

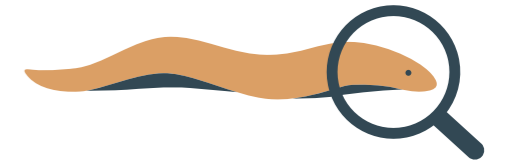


WORKSHOPS

Our work has also been disseminated through participation in conferences and workshops related to IAS:

- > Presentation of the **Belgian experience with the horticultural sector** at the workshop « Filières du végétal et EEE », organized by the French Biodiversity Agency OFB in Paris
- > Presentation on the Belgian Action plan at a German workshop on **Pathways Action Plans**
- > Presentation of a **survey of the angling sector** at the International Conference on Aquatic Invasive Species (ICAIS) 2024
- > Participation to a **workshop on scale and risks of import of animals and animal products** into Belgium in RBINS
- > Presentation on **Challenges of evidence-based policies on IAS** at Neobiota 2024 conference, in Lisbon
- > Participation in the workshop on **Horizon scan of future IAS of concern** for the EU by IUCN

FlatwormWatch



Citizen science project for monitoring of terrestrial flatworms

More and more non-native terrestrial flatworms are popping up in Europe. These mysterious predators can have a negative impact on our native soil fauna. Mapping these little-known organisms is therefore of great importance to protect our soil biodiversity. The FlatwormWatch project, launched in May 2024, seeks to both enable and enthusiasm citizens to join us in the search for these well hidden soil dwellers – and does so successfully!

Since early 2024, we have seen a **sharp increase in the number of observations of terrestrial flatworms** in Belgium. There are already over two times more observations of *Obama nungara* – the **most observed non-native species** – this year than all previous years combined. Moreover, we see a strong area expansion for some species. *Caenoplana variegata*, which was initially known only from a limited area around Hamme, was now also seen in the Kempen (Nijlen), Brussels and even in a localities in Wallonia. Moreover, in September this year, a **new species for Belgium** was reported in Flemish Brabant: *Diversibipalium multilineatum*. This discovery is a good example of the usefulness of citizen science in monitoring alien species.



To support the volunteering community in their efforts, we created an online reporting portal, **identification keys** and guidelines for a successful search. The project also animated an **active community of FlatWormWatchers**, through the publication of multiple newsletters, articles, social media posts, and a live event in the Meise botanical garden, ensuring the continued influx of observations in the future.



[Discover the project here](#)

FlatwormWatch is a project led by the National Scientific Secretariat on IAS, in collaboration with the Institute of Natural Sciences, Botanic Garden Meise, the Institute for Nature and Forest Research (INBO) and Hasselt University.



Pathway action plan: working with the sectors

The NSSIAS is in charge of engaging with stakeholders to implement preventative actions that reduce the risk of introduction and spread of IAS through priority pathways.

Freshwater sectors

In the framework of the thematic action plan on the introduction and spread of invasive alien species through **recreational and commercial/professional activities in freshwater environments**, the NSSIAS organized several rounds of dedicated meetings with stakeholders in order to jointly formulate **codes of conduct with regard to IAS for aquatic sports, angling, aquaculture, boating and management of freshwater systems**.

During these meetings, measures for limiting the introduction and spread of freshwater invasive alien species were presented and discussed with the stakeholders of each sector. The consensus of measures was then formulated into a code of conduct for each sector. Additionally, a proposition for a communication campaign was elaborated and discussed.

In 2025, the communication materials for the **first Belgian Check-Clean-Dry campaign** will be further developed in a dynamic process with the stakeholders before an official launch of the campaign in the spring.



Ornamental plants

In 2025, the Secretariat will discuss the creation of a code of conduct with the stakeholders (producers, sellers and users) of the ornamental plant sector. The aim is to reduce the establishment of ornamental invasive alien plants in nature and to limit the risk that invasive non-target organisms linked to the trade in potted plants (such as weeds or flatworms) are introduced into or spread within Belgium. In preparation, we performed a **risk screening analysis** establishing a **list of ornamental plant species with invasive risk for Belgium** that should be addressed with priority.



Aponogeton distachyos



Gaillardia grandiflora

A long list of **more than 1700 non-native species in trade** has been produced thanks to the effort of two master students. The environmental impact of each species on this list was scored by experts and - after consensus building - the long list was reduced to a **final shortlist of about 50 species**. This shortlist of priority ornamental species for which action is warranted will serve as a basis for discussions with the horticultural sector.

Soil

In the framework of the Belgian thematic pathway action plan on soil and habitat material, the NSSIAS conducted a sectoral baseline study in 2024 to characterize the risks posed by soil transport, identify quick wins and design targeted prevention measures that will then be negotiated with stakeholders.

The report looks at the structure of the sector in the three regions, identifying relevant federations and actors. The relevant legislation is summarized to determine aspects already covered by regulatory measures. The analyses finally focuses on the **mapping of soil movements in Belgium** over the last five years, with a specific focus on soils containing invasive alien plants (most often knotweeds).

Relevant experience in Belgium was gathered in meetings organized with the competent authorities and representatives of the sectors, as well as during the **Walloon colloque on soil and knotweeds** organized in November by ISSeP.



In 2025, the Secretariat will organize several working groups with the soil sector stakeholders with the aim of developing a code of conduct. This code of conduct will be mostly aimed at **plants species for which soil transports represent a major pathway** of introduction and spread in Belgium (e.g. Japanese Knotweeds, Giant Hogweed, Himalayan Balsam,...).



Invasive Alien Species
National Scientific Secretariat



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The National Scientific Secretariat on Invasive Alien Species (NSSIAS) is hosted at the Institute of Natural Sciences.