



2023

Highlights report



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

Foreword

The EU Regulation no 1143/2014 on Invasive Alien Species – 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, streamlining the workflow between the different entities, providing the Scientific Council with support in responding to the National Committee's IAS-related scientific advice and supporting official controls at the border. Additionally, the NSSIAS is now also in charge of engaging with stakeholders since this year, in the framework of the national action plan to prevent introduction and spread of IAS.

This highlights report gives an overview of the main projects and tasks conducted by the NSSIAS in 2023.

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A new addition to the team



The team of the Secretariat has grown this year! We have welcomed Johan De Gruyter in May 2023, who has joined us as a stakeholder engagement officer.

Johan previously worked for the LIFE3n-Bullfrog in Flanders, so he is already well versed in working on IAS in contact with multiple stakeholders. He is also finalising a PhD on soil microbial food webs at UAntwerp.

Johan is in charge of coordinating the collaborative construction of codes of conducts with different sectors in order to decrease the risk of introduction and spread of IAS.

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OUR TEAM



Jane Reniers
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Committee and Council

COMMITTEE

The NSSIAS has organised eight meetings of the **National Committee on IAS** in 2023, including an exchange with representatives of the EU Commission. Topics discussed this year were, among others, the coordination of management of Union list species, the granting of permits for ex-situ conservation and the preparation of a national communication campaign.




Pathway prioritisation



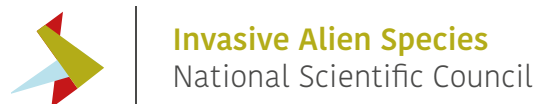
According to Article 13 of the EU IAS regulation, all Member States are obliged to identify and **prioritize pathways of unintentional introduction and spread** of IAS of Union Concern. The analysis of priority pathways for Belgium produced previously in 2018 and 2020 was updated to include the **88 species of Union concern**.

This update involved scoring the impact, the establishment potential, and frequency of use of pathways of the 22 new species. The report published presents the updated results as well as recommendations for the competent authorities for the future update of the national action plans on priority pathways.

 Consult the report [here](#)

SCIENTIFIC COUNCIL

Two meetings of the **National Scientific Council on IAS** were organized by the NSSIAS this year. The Council acts as an independent advisory body with scientific experts who provide the National Committee on IAS with advice. The main advice produced this year concerned permits for ex-situ conservation. The Council also discussed and validated the reports on prioritization and feasibility of management.



Best practices for management




What can we strive for in terms of management of the Union list species in Belgium?

To answer that question, a **first analysis** of management feasibility was published in 2019 for the species of the first and second Union lists. With the help of experts from INBO, DEMNA and the Belgian Biodiversity Platform, the exercise was extended to include the species of the third and fourth batch of the Union list.

For all Union list species of interest to Belgium, more than 30 species experts scored the **feasibility of two management scenarios**: the **complete eradication** of the species, and the **spread limitation or containment**. Based on these scores, a recommendation on the strategy was made to policy for each species, including advice on management methods.

Such an assessment not only gathers best practice management methods, but aids policymakers in formulating a realistic management strategy in a next phase.

 Consult the report [here](#)

Support to inspection

According to the EU IAS Regulation, Member states must perform official controls at borders to prevent the entry of listed IAS. Controls also need to be carried out in shops as it is forbidden to sell species of the Union list. The NSSIAS is charged with offering Belgian inspection services scientific support to identify IAS of the Union list during controls. Several actions were undertaken in that framework in 2023.



Scientific prioritization of goods to be controlled at the border

To prioritise which types of consignments should be controlled by inspection services in Belgium, an analysis of all imports and exports of goods at risk of spreading IAS in our country was performed, i.e. live plants, live animals, and habitat material (soil, compost, hay,...).



Coordination of controls in shops

The NSSIAS coordinated the development of a strategy for controls in shops – in 2024, regional inspection services will focus on mislabeling of species of the Union list in aquatic shops.



Sampling manual

Guidelines for identification and sampling of IAS were produced to support the work of FAVV-AFSCA inspectors and customs officers. These guidelines give operational advice on how to take photographs and take samples for DNA analysis for identification of species of the Union list



Genetic factsheets

The identification of IAS of Union concern sometimes requires DNA barcoding. That is why we are developing a genetic reference database for Union list species. Thanks to our partnership with **BopCo** – the Barcoding Facility for Organisms and Tissues of Policy Concern

– **DNA factsheets** were produced for 14 species. These evaluate if publicly available DNA sequence data is already reliable to identify Union list species.

Research project on flatworm detection in potted plants

The main pathway of introduction of non-native flatworms is via the transport as contaminants in potted plants. So far, there was no protocol to be able to detect their presence in such consignments. A research project was therefore granted to the University of Hasselt to develop a protocol to detect priority species of flatworms, including the New-Zealand flatworm (*Arthurdendyus triangulatus*) present on the Union list. The researchers successfully developed a DNA based method which requires to flush plant pot with water and applying qPCR to identify species. An operational protocol for sampling was also provided to border control agents.



PREPARATION FOR THE NEXT UPDATE OF THE UNION LIST

Future updates of the Union list are discussed by the **EU Scientific Forum**. We draft **information sheets on upcoming species**, which serve as a summary on the risk of introduction, establishment, spread and impacts of these species, applied to the Belgian context. It informs policy-makers when deciding on the vote of the Union list. Among the 10 species reviewed in 2023, there was for example the cape ivy, the red whiskered bulbul, and three flatworm species.



Outreach

The Secretariat is active in communication aimed at both professionals and general public. We strive to raise awareness on IAS, provide trainings and inform on best practices for prevention.

Posters on Animal and Plants species of Union Concern have been distributed in four languages (NL, FR, DE and EN) to municipalities, nature parks and nature organisations. The success of these posters has now become international as colleagues from other Member States made adapted versions in Spanish, Portuguese, and Czech.

➔ **Download the poster [here](#)**



Identification guides and species fiches (in FR and NL) were produced and disseminated to help inspection services and other employees of the public administrations to recognize species of the Union list on the field or during controls.

➔ **Download the booklets [here](#) and discover the species fiches [here](#)**



The **communication campaign "Home Sweet Home"** was launched this year in Belgian airports by the Federal Public Service Environment, with the support of NSSIAS. It aimed at informing traveling citizens about IAS and the threats linked to the introduction of IAS for our health and that of our ecosystems.

➔ **Discover the campaign [here](#)**



Trainings on biosecurity Capitalising on our previous experience of designing biosecurity guidelines together with selected freshwater managers, we developed a training session. This session was given 6 times, addressing managers of freshwater systems, such as municipalities, provinces and Contrats de Rivière.

Freshwater sectors: survey and baseline studies

In the framework of the Belgian thematic pathway action plan on freshwater activities, the NSSIAS conducted several sectoral baseline studies in 2023 to characterize the risks associated to each activity, identify quick wins and design targetted prevention measures that will then be negotiated with stakeholders.

ANGLING SURVEY



To evaluate the risks of introduction and spread of IAS by the Belgian angling community, a **national online survey** was conducted **among Belgian anglers** in 2023. Thanks to the collaboration with Sportvisserij Vlaanderen and the Maison Wallonne de la pêche, **more than 3500 responses were collected**.

This enabled us to pinpoint habits of anglers that can pose risks, e.g. the lack of uptake of cleaning of angling material, the mobility of anglers within and outside of Belgium and the associated risk of spread and introduction of harmful species, or release of bait into the environment. According to the anglers that completed the survey, IAS are one of the main threats to their hobby, alongside pollution, habitat degradation and illegal practices. Further awareness raising campaigns on IAS seem relevant due to a limited knowledge of species and processes.



BASELINE STUDIES

Three other important freshwater sectors have been characterized via **baseline studies**:

- > Aquaculture and fish stocking
- > Aquatic sports
- > Recreational and Commercial Boating

Extended reports were produced based on a literature survey, summary of legislation and collection of relevant experience in Belgium and in other countries. To achieve this, more than 15 meetings were organized with representatives of the sectors.

The reports look at the **structure of the sectors** 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 **awareness** of the sectors and on the **practices and risks** of transport of IAS associated to each type of activity. For fish stocking specifically, the study also looks at imports, movements and introductions of fish in the environment.



What's coming in 2024?

Some preparatory actions and meetings for projects planned for 2024 have already been initiated. Below a teaser on what's to come for 2024.

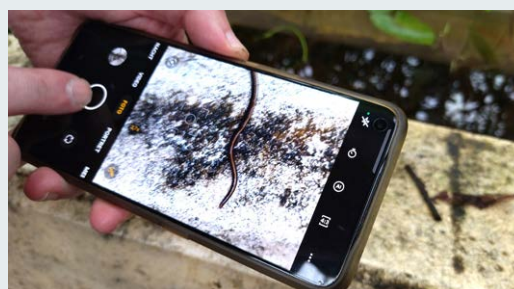
CODES OF CONDUCT

The launch of multiple working groups to create codes of conducts with stakeholders of three main sectors:

- > **Freshwater sector:** multiple water users such as anglers, divers, or boaters will be consulted with the final goal of adopting sectorial codes of conducts and launching the first Belgian Check-Clean-Dry campaign.
- > **Pet sector:** representatives of shops, fairs, hobbyists, veterinarians and associations will be gathered around the table to design adequate measures to reduce risks of pet owners releasing exotic pets in nature.
- > **Horticultural sector:** measures to reduce risks of spread of non-native plants will be discussed with horticultural federations and landscapers, and a guide of alternative plants will be developed.

CITIZEN SCIENCE PROJECT ON FLATWORMS

Non-native flatworms are soil-dwelling invertebrates that can greatly impact the native soil fauna. To improve knowledge on their presence in Belgium, we will launch the **FlatwormWatch** project. This citizen science initiative will be based on the popular platform for biodiversity monitoring [waarnemingen.be](https://www.waarnemingen.be) / [observations.be](https://www.observations.be).





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.