

Ikea pulls meatballs from Europe stores as horsemeat found (Update)

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Swedish furniture giant Ikea has withdrawn its own-label meatballs from sale in at least 16 European countries after Czech authorities found horsemeat in the product, the company said Monday.

One-kilogramme (2.2-pound) bags from the suspect batch of frozen meatballs had been pulled from the shelves in Slovakia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Britain, Portugal, Italy, the Netherlands, Belgium, Spain, Cyprus, Greece and Ireland, the company said.

Stores in Sweden, Denmark, France and Romania withdrew meatballs from sale as a precautionary measure but Ikea said there was no horsemeat in the meatballs served in its stores in the United States.

"We take this very seriously," company spokeswoman Ylva Magnusson said.

Ikea is the latest group to become caught up in a Europe-wide scandal over the presence of horsemeat in ready-made dishes that erupted in January when horse DNA was detected in beefburgers in Britain and Ireland.

Swiss food giant Nestle said Monday it had stopped using a Spanish supplier after tests determined there was horse DNA in products supposedly containing pure beef.

"We have today been informed that our meatballs could contain traces of

horsemeat, based on a test done in the Czech Republic," Ikea said in a statement.

"Our own tests haven't shown any traces of horsemeat. We now obviously have to study this further," it added.

The affected production batch had been pulled from shelves due to "customer concerns" but others remained on sale, the firm said.

Ikea said the meat in the product normally came from Sweden, Germany and Ireland but producers from other countries could be contracted when demand was especially high.

"During production peaks the meat could come from other countries," Magnusson said.

The company had given all its meat products the all clear after testing them for traces of horse two weeks ago.

"We are now double-checking this," Magnusson said, adding that results from the second round of testing were expected by the middle of this week.

Ikea's food division had 1.3 billion euros in revenue last year, according to its annual report.

Sweden's National Food Agency said it had been informed of the tests by Dafgaard, the company that produces the meatballs sold by Ikea in most European countries.

"They still don't know the amount (of horsemeat) involved," said Karin Cerenius, head of food control for the agency in the western region of Vaestra Goetaland.

The Czech veterinary watchdog, the State Veterinary Administration (SVA), said on Monday it had found horsemeat in meatballs supplied to Ikea and in burgers made in Poland that were imported by Denmark-based food chain Nowaco.

Last week, Czech food inspectors ordered the Tesco chain to withdraw frozen "beef" lasagne containing horsemeat. It was manufactured by the Tavola company in Luxembourg and imported and distributed by Nowaco.

They noted that horsemeat is sold for human consumption in the country but that if not mentioned on the product label it was misleading to consumers and could lead to a fine of up to three million koruna (118,000 euros, \$159,000).

Since horsemeat was detected in products in January, supermarkets across the continent have pulled prepared meals from their shelves, with effects felt as far away as Hong Kong where an imported brand of lasagne has been withdrawn from stores.

Ikea said Monday that the meatballs sold in its US stores were sourced from a US supplier.

"Based on the results of our mapping, we can confirm that the contents of the meatballs follow the Ikea recipe and contain only beef and pork from animals raised in the US and Canada," it said.

Nestle, which last week was forced to yank products off the shelves in Spanish and Italian supermarkets after detecting horsemeat in deliveries from a German supplier, said Monday it would stop buying all products from Spanish group Servocar after traces of horse were discovered.

"Tests have shown that one batch, supplied by Servocar, a company from

Casarrubios del Monte (Toledo), contains horse DNA above the one-percent threshold likely to indicate adulteration or gross negligence," it said in a statement.

The horsemeat scandal has seen sales of frozen prepared dishes containing beef plummet by 45 percent in France, a study showed on Monday.

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