

EU tests show 1 in 20 beef meals tainted with horse (Update 3)

April 16 2013

Thousands of DNA tests on European beef products have revealed extensive food fraud across the European Union, with almost one in 20 meals marketed as beef likely to be tainted with horse, the European Commission said Tuesday.

Releasing the results of more than 4,000 tests in recent weeks to detect the potential mislabelling of beef products, the EU executive said 193 products contained positive traces of horsemeat DNA, or 4.55 percent.

A further more than 3,000 tests for phenylbutazone, the painkiller known as bute used for horses but that can be harmful to humans, found only 16 samples containing traces of the drug, or 0.51 percent—14 in Britain, one in Ireland and one in the Czech Republic.

"Today's findings have confirmed that this is a matter of food fraud and not of food safety," said EU Health Commissioner Tonio Borg.

The DNA testing was conducted after a food scare engulfed Europe earlier this year when horsemeat was found in beef products, undermining consumer confidence in the food industry.

"Restoring the trust and confidence of European consumers and trading partners in our food chain following this fraudulent labelling scandal is now of vital importance for the European economy given that the food sector is the largest single economic sector in the EU," Borg said.

Though the scare first erupted in Ireland and Britain, there was no trace of horse-tainted products in either country, with the highest number found in France, Greece, Latvia and Denmark in that order.

A total 13.3 percent of the 353 tests carried out in France showed traces of horse, followed by Greece—12.5 percent of 288 tests—Latvia, with 10 percent of 70 tests and Denmark with 9.1 percent of 99 tests.

The Commission on February 15 ordered up to 150 DNA tests per member of the 27-nation union, depending on its size, as well as the tests for the presence of the veterinary drug.

"There is no immediate danger" regarding bute, said Commission spokesman Frederic Vincent. "You would have to eat hundreds of horse burgers for months to have problems."

Since meatballs in Ikea stores, sausages in Russia and frozen burgers in Britain's Tesco chain were pulled from shelves by the millions, the results of the tests have been anxiously awaited.

As the scare widened across the bloc and beyond, EU law enforcers were called in to work with national food inspectors to restore consumer confidence. A standing committee will mull the test results in Brussels late this week.

"Consumers have a right to expect that food is exactly what it says on the label," British Food Minister David Heath said Monday on launching a review of the nation's food system after the affair exposed a complex web of suppliers as well as the presence of fraud.

Governments had scrambled to figure out how and where mislabelling occurred in the sprawling chain of production spanning abattoirs, meat suppliers and processors across the continent.

Just last week, The Netherlands' food watchdog asked hundreds of European firms supplied by a Dutch wholesaler to check 50,000 tonnes of beef suspected to be contaminated with horsemeat.

Earlier Tuesday, furniture giant Ikea said it was thinking of selling or giving away meatballs in Sweden that were recalled from restaurants and shelves in 25 countries after tests showed traces of horse DNA.

"We are looking at ways of using the meatballs as food, since they are completely safe to eat. But we are still in talks with the authorities over this," spokeswoman Ylva Magnusson said.

"If we are unsuccessful our other option is to use them for bio-gas," she added.

Brussels has suggested tighter controls along the food chain as well as stiffer sanctions against food fraud, including high penalties.

"I am proposing new measures to prevent this in the future," said Borg, whose package of proposals is expected to be put to member nations shortly but with final legislation unlikely before the end of the current Commission's mandate in May 2014.

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