

Dutch egg probe widens to chicken meat tests

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In a new twist in Europe's tainted egg scandal, Dutch authorities announced Tuesday they had started testing chicken meat coming from affected poultry farms to determine whether it was also contaminated.

Scientists are looking for the presence of the insecticide fipronil, a substance potentially dangerous to humans, after supermarkets in Germany, the Netherlands, Belgium, Sweden and Switzerland pulled millions of eggs from the shelves.

"We are currently testing chicken meat in the poultry farms where eggs were infected to determine whether the meat is contaminated as well," Tjitte Mastenbroek, spokesman for food security agency NVWA, told AFP.

The probe focuses on "a few dozen" farms that produce both eggs and chicken meat, NVWA said.

Meanwhile, the Dutch Safety Board, the country's agency looking into civilian safety issues, announced it was opening its own probe into why fipronil was not detected earlier in eggs as well as "the role in this of the poultry sector and Dutch government."

"The way consumers have been informed about the risks of fipronil are also being investigated," the Hague-based OVV said in a statement.

Millions of chickens now face being culled in the Netherlands as the scandal widens across Europe.

Hard-hit Germany on Tuesday called on Belgian and Dutch authorities to quickly shed light on what it termed a "criminal network" involved in the contamination of eggs with fipronil.

"When one sees a criminal energy that's almost organised as a network it's unacceptable," said German Agriculture Minister Christian Schmidt.

He again criticised Belgian and Dutch authorities' tardy response to the crisis.

Belgium's top agricultural official Monday ordered the country's food safety agency to report within a day why it failed to notify neighbouring countries until July 20 despite knowing about fipronil contamination since June.

"It's not in the spirit of the early warning system to be aware in June but only to inform us by the end of July," Schmidt said.

Mastenbroek told AFP that a criminal probe by the NVWA under Dutch prosecution authorities and assisted by Belgium is continuing, looking at the role of companies in contaminating Dutch poultry farms with fipronil.

Meanwhile, the French government said Monday "thirteen batches of contaminated eggs from The Netherlands" were delivered in July to food processing companies located in central-western France.

First egg, now chicken

Mastenbroek said so far her agency's "highest priority" has been the detection of contaminated eggs.

"But now we also have the time to look at meat as a precautionary

measure," she said.

Most farms exclusively produce one or the other, said Eric Hubers at LTO, a Dutch farming organisation.

If the meat tests are negative for fipronil, producers will be cleared to resume sales, Mastebroek said.

LTO said the probability of chicken meat found to be infected was small.

However, if fipronil was detected "farming will be completely suspended," Mastebroek said.

'Cutting costs'

The contaminated egg scandal erupted last week when up to 180 Dutch farms were shuttered due to the presence of fipronil discovered in some of the eggs.

It is believed the toxic substance was introduced to poultry farms by a Dutch business named Chickfriend brought in to treat red lice, a parasite in chickens.

Dutch and Belgian media reports that the substance containing the insecticide was supplied to Chickfriend—a small company operating out of the Dutch poultry heartland in the central town of Barneveld—by a Belgian firm have not been confirmed.

Currently Dutch authorities have closed down 138 poultry farms—about a fifth of those across the country—and warned that eggs from another 59 farms contained enough levels of fipronil that they should not be eaten by children.

Belgium has blocked production from 51 farms—a quarter of those nationwide—with fipronil found at 21 farms, although levels were ten times below the maximum EU limit, the country's food and safety authority AFSCA said.

Other European countries including Austria, Bulgaria, Poland, Portugal and Romania said they were analysing imported eggs, but so far no contaminated eggs were found.

Environmental group Greenpeace on Tuesday called for massive reforms in the food supply system to become safer, healthier and more transparent and to do away with so-called "factory farming".

"Factory farming has been at the centre of a number of scandals, from Mad cow (disease) to bird flu, from swine flu to horsemeat," said Davin Hutchins, Greenpeace senior food campaigner.

"These are symptoms of a system trying to cut costs at every corner to maximise profits at the expense of public health and the environment," he said.

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