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US blocks some orange juice imports over fungicide

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US authorities on Friday seized nine shipments of orange juice from Brazil and Canada after their contents tested positive for an illegal fungicide.

The Food and Drug Administration said the orange juice tested positive for carbendazim, a pesticide that is not legal for use on oranges in the United States but is approved in Brazil and some other countries.

The FDA is testing samples of orange juice shipments from all countries and manufacturers that send such products to the United States after discovering the contamination earlier this month.

The regulatory agency said the pesticide was detected at 10 parts per billion or more in 11 shipments, two of which the firms decided not to import into the United States.

The other nine were held at the border. A total of 80 shipments were tested.

Six of the shipments were from Canada and five from Brazil.

In early January, the FDA said the traces of carbendazim appeared to come from pesticides being applied to orange trees.

The pesticide was present at "low levels" in some orange juice products that blend imported juice from Brazil with US-grown fruit juice, it said.

The Environmental Protection Agency did a preliminary risk assessment and concluded that consuming orange juice with carbendazim at low levels "does not raise safety concerns."

Speaking at a conference in Washington, Christian Lohbauer, president of Brazil's National Association of Citrus Juices Exporters, said he met with representatives of the FDA and US producers to discuss the issue.

"We asked the FDA to take into account the concentrated juice (which Brazil exports), and to accept that the (pesticide) level should be above 10 parts (per billion), between 50 and 60. All Brazilian juices have traces (of carbendazim) below 60 (parts)," he noted.

"Nobody is concerned about carbendazim in Europe (where a level of 200 parts is accepted). For a major part of the international market it is clear that this is a legal issue, having to do with an interpretation of rules set in the United States," Lohbauer added.

He noted that carbendazim was legal in Brazil, where all juice producers use it although other substances were being considered as possible substitutes.

And he stressed that the pesticide had no harmful effect on human health.

The United States takes in 13 percent of Brazil's juice exports.

Brazil is the world's biggest orange producer, with a 33 percent market share and is also the world's top orange juice exporter, with 85 percent market share.

Canada's Food Inspection Agency told AFP that the carbendazim is likely coming into the country from imported products, since Canada

does not grow its own oranges.

"Canada imports orange juice concentrate from exporting countries like Brazil. The source of carbendazim is from the citrus fruit used to make the juice concentrate. Canada uses this juice concentrate to make single strength juice," said spokesman Guy Gravelle.

Gravelle said the maximum residue limit in Canada is 10 parts per million for all products made from citrus, while the United States has no set limits on the pesticide but takes action on levels above 0.01 ppm.

"There is no indication in either Canada or the USA that the levels observed represent a risk to humans," he added.

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