

# EU ministers tackle horsemeat scandal at crisis talks

13 February 2013, by Claire Rosemberg

EU ministers called in Europe's law enforcement agency Wednesday to help tackle a spreading crisis over mislabelled frozen meals containing horsemeat and promised a crash DNA food testing in an effort to restore consumer confidence.

"We do not know exactly what has gone wrong," British Environment Minister Owen Paterson told reporters, as he prepared to drive to the headquarters of Europol in The Hague.

"We have to get to the bottom of these cases," he said after an emergency Brussels meeting of the countries affected by the scandal, adding: "This is a criminal conspiracy to defraud the public."

European Health Commissioner Tonio Borg said the EU was calling on all 27 European Union states to carry out DNA tests on beef products to see if they contained horsemeat.

Borg said the Commission would also urge carrying out checks for an equine veterinary drug—phenylbutazone—that can be dangerous to humans in all establishments handling raw horsemeat.

In the first month, there would be 4,000 tests for the drug and another 2,500 for horsemeat, with initial results due April 15.

These proposals will be examined Friday at an extraordinary meeting of the EU's Standing Committee on the Food Chain after a slew of cases where horsemeat has been found in products supposed to have been made out of beef.

If agreed, the proposals will go EU agricultural ministers on February 25, Borg said, adding that Europol would coordinate inquiries currently being carried out in countries affected by the crisis.

The Brussels meeting came a day after British police raided two meat plants and France reported

cases of horsemeat being passed off as beef in frozen foods.

Germany too announced a find of suspect lasagne Wednesday, with similar cases cropping up in Switzerland, the Netherlands and Norway.

The hastily convened talks gathered Britain, France, Germany, Ireland, Luxembourg, Poland, Romania and Sweden plus Borg.

Since Britain last week discovered horse meat in frozen lasagne sold under the Findus label, produced by French firm Comigel, the scandal has engulfed Europe.

Comigel has denied all wrongdoing, saying one of its subsidiaries bought the meat from another French firm, Spanghero, which said it was supplied by two abattoirs in Romania.

Traders in Cyprus and the Netherlands were also reportedly involved in the supply chain.

Romania has repeatedly denying being to blame and its Agriculture Minister Daniel Constantin again insisted on arrival that "all the horse meat provided by the Romanian companies that was placed on the EU market was correctly labelled."

Raids by British police and officials from the Food Standards Agency on Tuesday at a slaughterhouse in northern England and a factory in Wales saw both sites shut and all meat seized.

Andrew Rhodes, operations director of the FSA, said he had ordered an audit of abattoirs that produce horse meat in Britain when the scandal arose "and I was shocked to uncover what appears to be a blatant misleading of consumers."

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