

EU calls eggs talks as scandal spreads to Asia (Update)

11 August 2017

The EU on Friday called an emergency meeting to stop "blaming and shaming" over the insecticide-tainted eggs scandal as it emerged for the first time that the crisis had spread to Asia.

Hong Kong, Switzerland and 15 European Union countries have all received eggs contaminated with the chemical fipronil, which can harm human health, the European Commission said.

With concern going global, the commission said it had now called a meeting of ministers and food safety chiefs from affected EU countries, setting a provisional date of September 26.

"Blaming and shaming will bring us nowhere and I want to stop this," Vytenis Andriukaitis, the European Commissioner for health and food safety, told AFP as he announced the meeting.

Andriukaitis urged the Netherlands, Belgium and Germany—the countries at the epicentre of the crisis—to stop trading accusations about who is responsible for the scare.

Dutch Health Minister Edith Schippers, speaking publicly about the matter for the first time, admitted late Thursday that errors had been made in the government's handling of the crisis.

Fipronil is commonly used to get rid of fleas, lice and ticks from animals but is banned by the European Union from use in the food industry.

The EU insists there is no threat to human health, but the World Health Organization (WHO) says that when eaten in large quantities it can harm people's kidneys, liver and thyroid glands.

'Not a crisis meeting'

Millions of eggs and egg-based products have been pulled from European supermarkets since August 1 and there are growing questions about

who knew what, and when.

European Commission spokeswoman Mina Andreeva said that "this is not, let's be clear, a crisis meeting" and it is being held next month to get "distance to the events".

Brussels said the 15 EU countries affected were Belgium, the Netherlands, Germany, France, Sweden, Britain, Austria, Ireland, Italy, Luxembourg, Poland, Romania, Slovakia, Slovenia and Denmark, along with non-EU Switzerland.

But it also announced that Hong Kong had received some tainted eggs, with the southern Chinese city becoming the first place in Asia known to be affected.

Hong Kong reported finding eggs from The Netherlands contaminated with fipronil, the commission said, without giving further details.

The EU is seeking to quickly end the egg feud and maintain unity after a string of crises including Brexit, a migration influx and debt in the eurozone.

Belgium earlier this week accused the Netherlands of knowing about the fipronil eggs since November 2016 and failing to notify other countries, a charge the Dutch have denied.

However Belgium itself has been forced to admit that it knew about fipronil in eggs back in June but kept it secret for nearly two months because of a criminal investigation.

Dutch and Belgian investigators carried out coordinated raids on several premises on Thursday, arresting two people at a Dutch firm believed to be at the centre of the crisis.

"We need to work together to draw the necessary lessons and move forward instead of losing energy on finger pointing," commissioner Andriukaitis said.

Belgian Agriculture Minister Denis Ducarme said in a statement he was "very interested" in having a meeting of ministers from countries affected by the fipronil scandal.

Fresh discoveries

Fresh discoveries of contaminated eggs have continued daily.

French Agriculture Minister Stephane Travert said that since April the country had sold nearly 250,000 contaminated eggs, imported from Belgium and the Netherlands, but the risk for consumers was "very low" given French eating habits.

Denmark said on Thursday it had found a haul of 20 tonnes of tainted eggs, imported from Belgium.

The scandal hit eastern Europe for the first time as a tonne of contaminated egg yolk was found in Romania, and 21 boxes of the tainted eggs were discovered in Slovakia.

It also reached Luxembourg, while Britain said it had imported 700,000 eggs from Dutch farms linked to the scandal—far more than the 21,000 first thought.

The food scare is one of the biggest to hit Europe since the 2013 horsemeat scandal when equine meat was falsely labelled and mis-sold.

Previous food scandals include contamination of chickens and eggs by dioxin in 1999, which began in Belgium, and mad-cow disease—cattle feed contaminated by the ground-up carcasses of animals infected with a deadly brain disorder—which ran from roughly 1986-1998 and started in Britain.

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