

France Hunting Fraudsters in Horsemeat Scandal

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PARIS (AP) — Europe's horsemeat scandal is spreading and threatening cross-border tensions, as France says Romanian butchers and Dutch and Cypriot traders were part of a supply chain that resulted in horsemeat disguised as beef being sold in frozen lasagna around the continent.

No one has reported health risks from the mislabeled meat, but it has unsettled consumers across Europe.

Accusations are flying. In France, the foreign minister called it "disgusting," and consumer safety authorities increased inspections of the country's meat business, from slaughterhouses to supermarkets. Romania's president is scrambling to salvage his country's reputation. A Swedish manufacturer is suing a French supplier central to the affair.

The motivation for passing off horsemeat as beef appeared to be financial, and authorities are concentrating on pursuing anyone guilty of fraud in the affair, said France's junior minister for consumer goods, Benoit Hamon.

The complex supply chain for the suspicious meat crossed Europe's map.

An initial investigation by French safety authorities determined that French company Poujol bought frozen meat from a Cypriot trader, Hamon's office said in a statement Sunday. That trader had received it from a Dutch food trader, and that Dutch company had received the meat from two Romanian slaughterhouses.

The statement didn't name the Romanian, Cypriot or Dutch companies.

Poujol then supplied a Luxembourg factory, Hamon's statement said. The Luxembourg factory is owned by French group Comigel. The lasagna was ultimately sold under the Sweden-based Findus brand.

French supermarkets announced Sunday that they've recalled a raft of pre-prepared meals, including lasagna, moussaka and cannelloni suspected of containing undeclared horsemeat. The French ministers for agriculture, the food industry and consumer protection are holding an emergency meeting Monday with meat producers.

While horsemeat is largely taboo in Britain and some other countries, in France it is sold in specialty butcher shops and prized by some connoisseurs. But French authorities are worried about producers misleading the public. Foreign Minister Laurent Fabius called Sunday night on BFM television for "tough punishments" for what he described as "abominable" fraud.

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An affair that started earlier this year with worries about horsemeat in burgers in Ireland and Britain has spread into a Europe-wide scandal.

The EU commissioner for agriculture is meeting Monday with Romania's foreign minister about the latest horsemeat worries. Romanian President Traian Basescu said Sunday that his country could face potential export restrictions and lose credibility "for many years" if the Romanian butchers turn out to be the root of the problem.

"I hope that this won't happen," Basescu said in televised statements. Romania's agricultural ministry has begun an investigation.

In the Netherlands, Esther Filon, spokeswoman for the Dutch Foods and Wares Authority, said Sunday that the Dutch haven't started investigating but they are ready to if necessary.

"We're a ways away from being able to confirm or deny whether a Dutch company is involved," she said. "It would presumably be a question of fraud, rather than food safety. Horse meat can be sold legally in the Netherlands, as long as it is labeled as such."

Findus Sweden plans to sue France's Comigel for breach of contract and fraud, Findus Nordic CEO Jari Latvanen said Sunday. He said the company's deal with Comigel stipulates the beef in the lasagna should come from Germany, France or Austria, but that has not been the case.

"Customers must be able to trust the contents declaration," he said. "We will take strong action to make sure those who are liable in this affair are punished. Our reputation has been damaged, and we do everything to re-establish confidence."

Officials with Comigel did not immediately respond to phone calls or emails.

French media says Pujol subsidiary Spanghero bought the original meat in question. Spanghero says in a statement on its website that it bought what was labeled beef products from Romania, and threatened to take action against the supplier.

Alison Mutler in Bucharest, Romania, Toby Sterling in Amsterdam, and Malin Rising in Stockholm contributed to this report.

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