

Germany: Tighter Controls Needed for Meat Products

DAVID RISING, Associated Press

BERLIN (AP) — German officials on Monday vowed tighter controls on meat products and stronger penalties for companies that violate food-labeling rules as more items marketed as "all beef" were pulled from supermarket shelves after testing positive for horse meat.

Germany, Europe's largest economy, is one of several countries across the continent investigating the improper use of horsemeat and mislabeling of meat products in a still-unfolding scandal.

Consumer Protection Minister Ilse Aigner and her state counterparts announced a 10-point plan seeking to allay Germans' fears after five national supermarkets recalled lasagna, chili, tortellini and goulash — all with traces of horse meat. Most recently, German discount supermarket Lidl on Monday said it had recalled Combino brand "Beef Tortelloni," sold at its stores in Austria, after tests showed it contained horse meat.

Aigner said Germany will step up testing and look for any meat not clearly noted on the label — not just horse. "I can't say this is the end," she told reporters. "We have to count on other cases being discovered."

In addition to implementing a European Union action plan on testing meat products, some of Germany's other plans include making sure consumers are more quickly informed as soon as a company has detected that its product may be mislabeled, and facilitating better information flow between state and federal agencies.

Horse meat has turned up across Europe in frozen supermarket meals such as burgers and lasagna, as well as in beef pasta sauce, on restaurant menus, in school lunches and in hospital meals.

Millions of products were pulled from store shelves in Britain, Ireland, France, Spain, Germany, Denmark, Finland, Sweden and Norway after the scandal broke, and supermarkets and food suppliers were told to test processed beef products for horse DNA.

European officials have said the scandal is the result of fraud, and possibly an international criminal conspiracy to pass off cheap horse meat as more expensive beef. And although officials say that eating horsemeat is not generally dangerous, the scandal has upset people in places where such meat traditionally is not eaten.

France agreed on Monday to partially restore the health certification of a meat seller at the heart of the uproar.

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Published on Food Manufacturing (<http://www.foodmanufacturing.com>)

In a decision just ahead of a meeting between French government officials and workers at the Spanghero company, French Agriculture Minister Stephane Le Foll said he would allow it to resume production of ground meat, sausages and some cooked goods after inspectors found nothing amiss there over the weekend.

However, frozen goods to be sold and processed elsewhere, which were the center of questions over whether Spanghero officials deliberately passed off horse meat as beef, remain off limits for the company.

The French agriculture minister reiterated at a news conference the allegation of fraud at the plant in southern France — but said the workers "aren't responsible." The government's final report is due Friday.

The director general of Spanghero, Olivier Gemin, expressed relief at the partial reopening of the plant, but noted in an interview with RTL radio that the scandal risks lasting damage for the company, which employs some 300 people. "Our company is still in great danger," he said.

Relief at the partial start-up was palpable among employees. "This is a big step, or we've climbed up the first step, I should say," Marc Adiveze said. "We now need to climb up the entire staircase. We need to restore consumer confidence."

The French government has said the chain of fraudulent meat sales reaches across 28 firms in 13 countries.

At least some of the horse meat originated at abattoirs in Romania, and was sent through a Cyprus-registered trader to a warehouse in the Netherlands. Spanghero bought the meat from the trader, then resold it to the French frozen food processor Comigel; it was then marketed in other countries.

On Monday, the Czech Republic said it was trying to confirm that nearly 15,000 packages of lasagna made by Comigel had horse meat. If confirmed, that would be the first time the scandal had spread to the country.

Germany also intends to rethink food labeling regulations so that consumers can be sure where products come from.

"We want to be as transparent as possible for the consumer," Aigner said.

Source URL (retrieved on 01/31/2015 - 4:12am):

<http://www.foodmanufacturing.com/news/2013/02/germany-tighter-controls-needed-meat-products>