Ireland: Testing Shows Polish ‘Beef’ 75 Percent Horsemeat

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DUBLIN (AP) — Ireland's government announced Monday that DNA testing has confirmed that Polish meat offcuts imported into Ireland and labeled as beef actually contain up to 75 percent horsemeat, a discovery made as Ireland's food-standards scandal forced a second burger manufacturer to shut operations.

Agriculture Minister Simon Coveney said police have joined Ireland's 3-week-old investigation into why horsemeat has been detected in some Irish-produced burgers and the chief suspect, Poland, has yet to supply any adequate explanation.

Ireland's Food Safety Authority ordered the original DNA tests on Irish-produced burgers to determine whether they contained other meats beside beef. The discovery of horsemeat poses no danger to consumers but highlights the inaccuracy of food labels on some processed meat products and points to potential fraud in the industry. Horsemeat costs a fraction of beef.

DNA results last month on a wide range of factory-made burgers in Ireland found more than a third contained at least a trace of horsemeat — and two, manufactured for the British supermarkets Tesco and Co-op, contained 29 percent and 18 percent horsemeat respectively. British officials said they feared that such horsemeat-tainted burgers had been on sale since mid-2012.

The Agriculture Department said Monday's test results found that a sample of the Polish product taken from the Rangeland Foods beef-burger processing plant was found to be composed of 75 percent horsemeat.

It wasn't determined whether the latest results represented a higher level of horsemeat than detected in earlier tests, given that the initial DNA tests were on finished burgers while the latest pinpointed the volume of horsemeat in the imported Polish ingredient itself. The Polish product was labeled as beef offcuts — slaughterhouse leftovers — that the Irish plants used as cheap filler material in budget-priced burgers.

Polish authorities, fearful that their own lucrative meat-export markets could be damaged, insist their own testing of slaughterhouses implicated by Ireland has not turned up any evidence that any of them handled horsemeat.

In its statement, the Irish Agriculture Department said its officials were "in continuing contact with the Polish authorities as the investigation has shown that all implicated raw material ingredient is labeled as Polish product."

Rangeland in Castleblaney, in County Monaghan near the border with Northern

Ireland, said it has voluntarily suspended operations. Rangeland since 1982 has produced frozen beef burgers for use in fast-food outlets, chiefly in Ireland, and today has a work force of 80.

The government statement said Rangeland informed Agriculture Department officials last Thursday they had some of the suspicious Polish product in their stores. Rangeland officials said it was supplied by an Irish-based meat trader who is also under investigation.

Coveney said officials still were trying to figure out whether the trader supplied the Polish offcuts to other processing plants.

Before Monday, the economic damage had focused on the Silvercrest processing plant, also in Monaghan, which had been identified as the primary producer of horsemeat-tainted burgers. Its operations have been suspended and it has lost contracts worth more than €45 million ($65 million) annually, chiefly its two biggest customers: Tesco, the biggest supermarket in both Britain and Ireland, and Burger King.

Burger King was first to cut off relations with Silvercrest, which previously supplied all the beef patties used in its restaurants in Ireland, Britain and Denmark. Burger King conducted its own DNA tests on Silvercrest-supplied burgers still in its stores but said it found no horsemeat traces.

Retail customers have denounced Silvercrest for violating a key clause of their contract specifying that all beef must be sourced in Ireland. Tesco said it would seek other Irish suppliers, but Burger King shifted its patty supply to Italy and Germany.

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