

Aqlifoods Faces Food Safety Scandal After Recall

MAEBASHI, Japan, Jan. 3 (Kyodo) — Aqlifoods Co. regrets taking hours to publicly announce Sunday that some of its products had been tainted with pesticides when it had already asked retailers to pull the items from their shelves, company officials said Thursday.

In the scandal where the company had earlier claimed no one was injured, a man in his 40s in Tottori Prefecture vomited after eating a product subject to the recall, the prefectural government said Thursday, adding it remains unknown if the product the man ate was laced with the chemical.

While police investigations are under way to pin down how the products were tainted, an Aqlifoods source said the products found laced with an organic phosphate called malathion were packaged in the same section of the company's Gunma factory after they were processed through different product lines.

Aqlifoods, a subsidiary of Maruha Nichiro Holdings Inc. announced a recall of 6.3 million packages of frozen foods at 5 p.m. Sunday, after supermarkets and other retailers nationwide were told in the morning to remove the products, the officials said. This was after initial reports about the unusual odor of some products that came from consumers from 13 prefectures in November, according to the company.

It published a notice in newspapers' Monday editions about the detection of the chemical and the recall. The volume of recall was later changed to around 6.4 million.

"We regret taking time to prepare for a press conference while withdrawing the products," a company official said.

On Tuesday, Aqlifoods said the pesticide level found in some of its products -- 15,000 parts per million -- could sicken a child who consumed just one-eighth of a croquette, changing its previous estimate of 60 croquettes comprising a toxic dose, five hours after an advisory by the health ministry.

The Gunma Prefecture-based company detected malathion in a total of nine product samples from seven different product lines.

At the Gunma factory, these products were moved from the manufacturing lines to the same packaging room with eight of them delivered to three warehouses in Kanagawa and Saitama prefectures, according to the company source. The remaining one has not been traced.

In Tottori City, a man in his 40s ate an Aqlifoods croquette Dec. 24 at his home, threw up the following morning, and recovered later the in the day, the prefectural government said, adding the man has since reported no symptoms.

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Since there was no leftover from the consumed product, it remains unknown whether it contained the agrichemical. The product package, however, indicated that it was subject to the recall that covers the potentially harmful products made at the Gunma factory.

Gunma prefectural police suspect someone deliberately laced the products since the detected level of pesticide was too high to be residue from ingredients. A prefectural official also said it is unlikely the chemical found its way into the products in the regular manufacturing process.

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