

Britain: Thousands of tons of condemned meat "laundered" for human consumption

Richard Tyler
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Raids by police and environmental health officers in March and April uncovered covert operations that were systematically “laundering” rotten or diseased poultry meat and passing it off as fit for human consumption. Tens of thousands of chicken and turkey carcasses condemned by slaughterhouses as being only fit for pet food were cleaned up and sold to processed food manufacturers, or repackaged and retailed to the public as leg and breast meat.

As a result of several major investigations, tons of suspect poultry has been impounded and a number of those involved in passing off the rotten meat arrested. At the end of April, environmental health inspectors seized 40 tons of condemned meat from a walk-in freezer when they raided premises in Liverpool.

In March, 19 people were arrested in raids that involved 100 police officers and 50 environmental health officers and Meat Hygiene Service staff across five counties. This followed four months of investigations and surveillance to gather evidence of the illicit trade. The premises searched included Derbyshire pet food processors Denby Poultry Meats, two meat wholesalers and two meat-processing plants in Buckinghamshire, Northamptonshire, Greater Manchester and West Yorkshire. Police say that further arrests may well result, once they have sifted through documents and examined computers also seized in the raids.

According to the *Sunday Times*, insiders claimed the trade had “operated for at least six years. The pet food plant was processing at least five tons of poultry a week. If the trade had gone undetected for six years, more than 1,500 tons of suspect poultry could have entered the human food chain.”

Major supermarket chain Tesco has since recalled thousands of “Premier” brand chicken steaks and

nuggets that have been on sale since last year, and are now suspected of containing tainted poultry. Shiphams withdrew batches of its meat pastes, also thought to have included poultry originating from the Denby plant.

At the end of last year, five men were sentenced to over 24 years imprisonment by a court in Hull, for supplying condemned poultry meat for human consumption. The trial revealed that they had been involved in a scam that had recycled more than 1,300 tonnes of tainted meat, estimated to have netted more than £3 million.

Those jailed last December included one defendant who was a former director of Prosper DeMulder, the UK's biggest meat rendering operation, and who, together with his son, ran Wells By-Products, one of Britain's largest poultry rendering firms. At one time, their company had processed 85 percent of the condemned poultry from slaughterhouses and food manufacturers.

Although the major supermarket chains insist they observe the highest standards in food safety and hygiene, the illicit trade in condemned meat is a direct result of the economic imperatives that dominate Britain's retail food outlets. The UK market for groceries was worth some £77 billion in 2000, with 84 percent of this trade controlled by just six firms—Asda, Morrisons, Safeway, Sainsbury's, Somerfield and Tesco.

While farm incomes have slumped—a report by accountants Deloitte & Touche records a plummet of up to 90 percent since 1995/96—supermarket profits are booming. Just last month, supermarket chain Tesco broke the £1 billion profit barrier. Squeezing out smaller local outlets, the big chains have all recorded massive gains: in the last five years Asda profits

increased from £258 million to £410m; Safeway was up from £176m to £341m; Sainsbury's up from £809m to £888m and Somerfield more than doubled its profits from £92m to £208m.

The pressure of the supermarket oligopoly on suppliers for lower costs—both farmers and food manufacturers—encourages an atmosphere where corners are cut and a blind eye turned if it means landing the all-important contract to supply a major chain. The downward price pressure on the suppliers is not generally passed on to the consumer however. A Competition Commission report last year found that UK food prices averaged up to 16 percent higher than in other European countries, something that could only partially be explained by the relative strength of the pound.

When Labour came to power in 1997, it promised to champion the public's right to safe food. The discrediting of the previous Conservative government was due in no small part to their scandalous indifference to the dangers posed by BSE, or “Mad Cow” disease. Labour pledged to establish a Food Safety Agency (FSA) that would protect the interests of the consumer, unlike the Ministry of Agriculture, which was widely regarded as little more than a lobby for the most powerful agribusiness interests.

The trade in illicit poultry meat is not just a matter of a few rogues on the periphery, as the court case in Hull last year revealed. It is well organised and involves figures with links to the mainstream food industry. However, the FSA has only just issued a “consultation” document calling for condemned poultry meat to be stained with indelible dye to prevent it being passed off for human consumption.

As long as the production of food is dominated by privately owned agribusiness, the public will have to pay a high price, not just in monetary terms, but also in the compromising of safety and nutritional standards to the profit motive.



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