

Deregulation leads to Britain's largest ever food recall

Barry Mason, Barbara Slaughter
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On February 18, the British Food Standards Agency (FSA) issued a recall notice on some 350 food products because of the contamination of chilli powder with the potentially cancer-causing chemical Sudan 1. By March 9, the list of withdrawn products had grown to 580.

The withdrawals involved companies and factories across the UK, including all the leading supermarkets. Hundreds of products were removed from supermarket shelves and customers were told to return any of the listed commodities for refund. This was the largest food product recall ever in Britain.

Sudan 1 is a known contaminant that should have been regularly tested for by the food manufacturers using chilli powder. The bright red dye is used to colour petrol, solvents and shoe polish. It has been prohibited as a food additive throughout the European Union, including Britain, since 1995, when tests showed that rats fed on a diet including Sudan 1 developed liver and bladder cancer.

In 2003, French authorities discovered the presence of Sudan 1 in chilli powder when suspicions were aroused about a batch that was very bright in colour. The resulting scare led to the withdrawal of 250 food products. Since then, certificates have been required to prove the absence of Sudan 1 before chilli powder could be imported into the European Union.

According to the *Observer* of February 26, a five-ton batch of the adulterated chilli powder had arrived in Britain from India in 2002, before the EU ban was introduced. It was supplied by Gautum Export, a company that, along with its supplier, Volga, has since had its license removed by the Indian authorities for selling adulterated chilli powder to traders in Europe. The British importer was E W Spice, which then sold it to East Anglian Food Ingredients (EAFI). In July 2003, EAFI had to pay £360,000 in connection with claims regarding Sudan 1.

The British FSA attempted to trace all companies that had received supplies of the contaminated chilli powder, but, according to the *Observer*, some had already been sold to Unbar Rothon, and investigators now believe that not all the contaminated material was recalled and destroyed. Eventually, Unbar Rothon sold the spice to Premier Foods, owner of the Crosse and Blackwell brand and one of Britain's largest food manufacturers, where it was used in the manufacture of Worcester sauce.

The contaminated Worcester sauce was then sold to 200 manufacturers for use as flavouring in food products supplied to Asda, Marks & Spencer, Sainsbury's, Tesco, Waitrose and all the other major British supermarket chains. It was also used by two catering companies that produce food for hospitals and schools. The sauce may also have been exported to the United States, the Caribbean and Europe. The FSA has admitted that food contaminated by the dye has been consumed for 16 months.

Worcester sauce is used to flavour a wide range of processed foods—crisps, pies, pasta dishes, casseroles, stews, sausages, mayonnaise, vegetable dishes, dumplings and many other dishes.

This widespread contamination only came to light in January 2005, when an Italian manufacturer conducted tests on Worcester sauce purchased from Premier Foods. They passed the information to Premier Foods on January 28, which contacted the FSA on February 7. The information was not made public until 11 days later.

The FSA was set up in 2000 by the British Labour government. Under the previous Tory administration, contaminated beef from cattle infected with BSE—a brain wasting disease—had been allowed to enter the human food chain. Despite government insistence on the safety of beef, young people began to develop variant CJD, a human form of the disease linked to eating contaminated beef. To date, some 150 people have died from vCJD.

Throughout the period of the BSE crisis, the Labour opposition was complicit in a government cover-up. After Labour was elected in 1997, it attempted to distance itself from the consequences of the BSE crisis. It established the FSA, which was supposed to be independent of the food industry and represent the interests of consumers.

The Sudan 1 affair has exposed the falsity of such claims. Like its predecessor, the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, the FSA's principal concern is to maintain public confidence in the British food industry. An FSA statement on February 18, "What is the health risk of Sudan 1?" tried to calm public fears. It read: "Sudan 1 could contribute to an increased risk of cancer and it is *not possible to identify a safe level or to quantify the risk*. However, at the levels present in these food products the risk is likely to be very small" (emphasis added).

The French food authority, which first discovered the presence of Sudan 1 in the chilli powder, has stated that it "cannot exclude the possibility of a risk to human health *even at low doses*" (emphasis added).

Part of the business-orientated policy of the Blair government is self-regulation. In relation to the presence of the food dye, companies are supposed to rely on written assurances from suppliers that the chilli powder is not contaminated.

FSA chairman Sir John Krebs dismissed concerns over exposure to Sudan 1. He told the *Observer* on February 27, "Everyone should recognize that life is not risk-free, and food is no different."

Krebs has made clear he does not want to use legal powers to force food production companies to check for contamination. He stated, "Ultimately it is the responsibility of the food industry to check their products and not to include ingredients that are illegal and pose a risk to their customers. While some of the media coverage has called for someone to 'get a grip' on this, calling for more regulation, I think before we jump to that conclusion we would want to look very carefully at the consequences of having more rules."

Krebs said he did not support requiring the companies to pay for independent checks, which, according to his own figures, cost only £100. This is at a time when Tesco is expected to shortly announce annual profits of £2 billion.

Kevin Hawkins, who heads the British Retail Consortium, representing food companies and supermarkets, accused the FSA of overreacting. Hawkins, who is a former director of Sainsbury's [Supermarkets],

stated: "Sometimes you have to take a view about whether the risks to public health are really so serious."

However, on February 22, Tony Hines, responsible for crisis management at Leatherhead Food International, told the *Daily Mail*: "The industry has been caught out and we are going to be castigated for it. This is the Armageddon, the worst-case scenario.... Manufacturers have been relying on written assurances about the integrity of their ingredients ... that must now be called into question ... if they have chilli powder they need to get it tested."

A spokesman for the National Consumer Council has called for an investigation without delay, saying that it is alarming that it has taken so long to get these products withdrawn.

Whilst it is unlikely that the FSA will take action against Premier Foods, the company may come under scrutiny from the Financial Services Authority. According to reports, acting under the guidance of the FSA, Premier held back from making a public announcement about the possible contamination until the scale had been established.

The *Observer* raised the possibility that people in the know may have dumped shares. It explained that the Financial Standards Authority "will want to make sure that nobody with prior knowledge of the crisis could have used it to gain advantage by selling or short-selling Premier's shares. The regulator is understood to have begun examining a mini-surge in share trades in the days leading to up the 18 February."

Food production is now a global industry that is controlled by a handful of companies. Deregulation, intense competition and the drive to maximize profits mean that food contamination could threaten the health of millions of people.



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