

Dioxin contaminates food in Germany

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The media has been full of reports in recent days about animal feed laced with high levels of dioxin being fed to pigs and poultry and the detection of the cancer-causing chemical in meat and eggs.

The press and animal and consumer groups have pointed to a number of institutions that could be responsible for the contamination, including feed manufacturers, suppliers, agribusinesses, supermarkets and political agencies, which failed to carry out proper inspections. All have a responsibility for this latest food scandal in one way or another.

A common theme in the media, however, is that the main culprit is ultimately the consumer who has been unwilling to pay more for higher quality food. This was the conclusion reached by a panel of guests on the influential Anne Will talk show on television last Sunday.

This absurd and cynical argument corresponds to the outlook of the most affluent sections of population who do not worry about family food budgets. As levels of poverty grow, many people, including those with average incomes, have increasing problems providing their families with healthy, high-quality food and are increasingly seeking cheaper alternatives.

In a television interview Monday morning, a spokesman for the consumer watchdog group Food Watch accused the government ministry for consumer protection of functioning essentially as a lobbyist for the food industry.

The first reaction of government officials was to downplay the danger. On a daily basis, however, new details came to light that led the authorities to close down thousands of farms that used the contaminated feed. The closures hit 4,700 farms, mostly poultry and pig farms in Lower Saxony, Schleswig-Holstein, North Rhine-Westphalia and other states.

Dioxin levels exceeding more than 78 times the legal limit were detected. A farm in Verden in Lower Saxony has slaughtered hundreds of pigs due to excessive levels of the toxin.

Three thousand farms reopened after officials declared contamination did not exceed acceptable levels (i.e., less

than 0.75 nanograms per gram of feed). Last Saturday, around 500 dairy farms across the country were also reopened following inspections. Four hundred farms remain closed as of this writing.

This is not the first time that such high levels of dioxin have been identified in food and the environment. In 2008 dioxin-contaminated pork from Ireland was exported to up to 25 countries. Such events have taken place on a regular basis since the 1970s.

Dioxins—essentially hydrocarbon compounds treated with chlorine—are pollutants not easily broken down by the environment. A total of 210 such compounds are known. The most toxic is Tetrachlorodibenzodioxin (TCDD)—the contaminant in Agent Orange, the herbicide used by the US military during the Vietnam War, with devastating consequences for Vietnamese civilians and US soldiers.

One of the biggest chemical disasters in Europe occurred in Seveso, Italy, just north of Milan, in July 1976, when a spill at a small chemical plant exposed residents to record high levels of TCDD. Thousands of animals died and hundreds were afflicted with skin lesions, and the exposure has been linked to higher incidences of lymphoma and breast cancer over the last three decades.

Dioxins can be produced in all chemical and manufacturing processes involving chlorine, including smelting and paper production. In the 1980s huge amounts of dioxins were introduced into the environment in the form of pesticides and other chemicals. In the meantime laws have been introduced to restrict dioxins in the air and soil, but the toxin remains very durable.

Even small amounts can be dangerous to humans and animals. Although contaminated food does not usually produce immediate symptoms, dioxins accumulate in the bodies of animals or humans—especially in the fatty tissues—and can remain for decades. The consequence is chronic diseases, immune system disorders, severe skin and respiratory diseases including damage to the thyroid and intestines, or cancer.

The exact origin of the latest dioxin contamination remains unclear. Officials have pointed the finger at Harles & Jentzsch, a Schleswig-Holstein-based company that produces fat for industrial uses, including production of animal feed. The company filed for bankruptcy on Thursday.

The company receives its raw materials from a Dutch manufacturer, widening the scope of the scandal across Europe. Officials investigating the company in Schleswig-Holstein revealed that Harles & Jentzsch had originally supplied them with samples free of contamination. This fact raises serious questions about the state of official controls. As a general practice food manufacturers are expected to carry out self-monitoring. State controls are extremely rare and apparently take place mostly with prior notice to the company. The federal agriculture minister continues to regard this practice as sufficient and has sought to shift blame to individual states.

For years federal, state and local administrations run by the Christian Democrats, Social Democrats and Greens have lifted safety controls in the name of cutting “bureaucratic red tape”. The reduction in the number of regulators has turned factory inspections into a farce. Federal regulatory agencies have also broken up, undermining investigation and enforcement.

The agricultural policy of the European Union has also contributed to the increasing contamination of food. The EU regards its main task as increasing the competitiveness of European companies on the world market, with the health interests of the continent’s people relegated to a subsidiary role. The EU hands out nearly €60 billion per year in subsidies and agriculture is the single largest item in the EU budget of €123 billion. German dairies, sugar producers and animal farms received over €7.5 billion in 2009 alone.

In fact, the biggest concern at the German Agriculture Ministry was the recent announcement by South Korea and Slovakia that they were banning the import of German eggs and poultry.

Tilo Bode from Food Watch told the dpa news agency that the government refrained from making any demands on the feed industry in order not to endanger the export of German meat products. The group has demanded that all 1,700 feed manufacturers be compelled to test every batch of feed for dioxin, document the results, and immediately inform the authorities of violations.

Food Watch believes that about 80 percent of dioxin finds its way into human food via animal feed, while in the past the poison stemmed mainly from incinerators and

was transmitted by air into the human body. According to research conducted by Food Watch, pesticides were the origin of the dioxin contamination detected at Harles & Jentzsch.

A number of media and environmental organizations have accused “industrial agriculture” as a whole for the responsibility for repeated food scandals. The *Süddeutsche Zeitung* wrote: “Since affecting food production, it has raged terribly: almost half of German farms were forced to close in the 1980s. They had to give up because they could not withstand the pressure to produce more food at ever-lower prices. The remaining farmers have often bowed to pressure and introduced intensive farming methods, overwhelmingly concentrating on maximum yield.”

This, however, is only half the story. Industrial farming methods are undoubtedly necessary to adequately nourish humanity. It is not large-scale production as such which is responsible for contamination but capitalism and the single-minded drive for profit. Producers continually seek access to cheaper raw materials to maintain an edge against domestic and global competitors.

Neither the media, political establishment, nor the food producers and suppliers are inclined to point out that recurring food poisoning of the population is systemic. The transition between “normal” capitalist production methods and market conditions to criminal practices is fluid. As long as the food industry is devoted to increasing the profit of shareholders, companies and the banks, food scandals such as the latest one in Germany are inevitable.



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