

UK horsemeat scandal spreads to Europe

Barry Mason
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UK Environment Secretary Owen Paterson convened an emergency meeting on February 9 at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (DEFRA) over the discovery of horsemeat in processed foods labelled as containing beef.

In January, millions of beef burgers were withdrawn from sale in Tesco supermarkets after the discovery they contained horsemeat. This has been followed by discovery of horsemeat in processed meat products such as beef lasagne produced by Findus.

Findus was made aware of possible contamination of its products on January 29, but only withdrew the products on February 7 after informing the Food Standards Agency (FSA). After testing 18 of its beef lasagne products, 11 were found to contain horsemeat ranging in content from 60 percent to 100 percent. According to Labour MP Tom Watson, Findus were warned of possible problems by one of its suppliers last August, but this is denied by Findus. The Aldi supermarket chain has also withdrawn processed beef products.

The emergency meeting called by Paterson was attended by the big four supermarkets—Tesco, Sainsbury's, Asda and Morrisons—retail bodies and leading food producers.

It has taken weeks for Paterson and the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government to respond to the scandal. The level of indifference was shown by Paterson's remark that he would be quite happy to let his family eat one of the processed lasagne meals.

His comments echoed the statement of Conservative Agricultural Minister John Gummer at the time of the Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) crisis in cattle in May 1990. Gummer publicly fed his four-year old daughter Cordelia a hamburger in the midst of the "mad cow disease" crisis, just days after the government had banned beef offal for human consumption. It was later proven that BSE was

responsible for the development of new variant Creutzfeldt–Jakob disease (nvCJD) in humans, a degenerative neurological disorder whose source was infected beef and its derivatives.

Gummer's stunt was part of repeated government denials that BSE posed any risk to the human population. As of January 2012, an estimated 176 people in the UK had died from nvCJD. The exact number is unknown due to uncertainty as to its incubation time.

Following the emergency meeting, Paterson warned it was likely that more cases of food adulteration will come to light. He has ordered 28 unnamed local authorities to carry out tests and report the results to his department by the weekend. He concedes the contamination is unlikely to be accidental and may be the result of an "international criminal conspiracy." The police have met with the FSA, but as yet have not launched an investigation.

The scandal has spread to France with Findus France recalling products. An European Union-wide health alert has been issued.

The *Observer* reported on February 10 that it had been informed by experts there "is evidence that both Polish and Italian mafia gangs are running multi-million-pound scams to substitute horse meat for beef during food production. There are claims that vets and other officials are intimidated into signing off meat as beef when it is in fact cheaper alternatives such as pork or horse... Some of the meat that went into Ireland came from suppliers in Poland, which exports around 25,000 horses for slaughter each year. Industry sources also suggested to the *Observer* that gangs operating in Russia and the Baltic states were playing a role in the fraudulent meat trade."

Food production is one of Britain's major manufacturing sectors, worth around £75 billion, and, like many other industries, is reliant on European and

world-wide supply chains. The burgers containing horsemeat that had to be withdrawn from Tesco and Burger King among others were supplied by UK-based Silvercrest, who in turn had been supplied by the Irish-based McAdam Foods. McAdam Foods were supplied by the Hull-based Flexi Foods, who in turn had sourced the raw meat from two Polish companies.

Findus and Aldi had been supplied meat from the French company Comigel, which sources some of its meat from Romania. While eating horsemeat in itself is not harmful to human health, there are concerns over the sources of horsemeat going into the human food chain. A drug used in the treatment of horses, phenylbutazone or “bute”, if present in horse carcasses entering the human food chain could induce a serious blood disorder known as aplastic anaemia. Bute was proscribed as a drug for humans because of such reactions.

In addition, there are restrictions in the export of horsemeat from Romania because of an endemic viral disease, equine infectious anaemia. Also known as Horse AIDS, its presence in the Romanian horse population led to the banning of the live export of horses three years ago. Experts say the disease does not pose a danger to humans, but its presence could indicate other health problems.

The scandal is the result of the drive to cut costs and drive up profits by multi-billion pound corporations. As a result, Britain and other countries are increasingly seeing scandals involving food adulteration previously associated with the 18th century.

The *Financial Times* reported, “The drive for ever cheaper food has put stresses on a food chain that has become more global, complex and stretched. Karel Williams of Manchester Business School dubbed it a ‘normal accident’—the inevitable result of distressed processors ‘constantly ringing around to get the cheapest deal this week’ and an international trade in animal parts.”

Findus Foods was acquired by private equity company Lion Capital, whose 44-year old multi-millionaire head, Lyndon Lea, has made a fortune buying up firms such as Weetabix, which he then sold to China.

In the statement following Saturday’s meeting, Paterson stressed it was the retailers, i.e., the major supermarkets, that had ultimate responsibility for what

is in products they sell, opening up the prospect of them self-policing their activities. He said the supermarkets had agreed to report their results to the FSA every three months.

The FSA was set up by the last Labour government in response to the BSE crisis. Its ability to police the food production process has been undermined by government spending cuts. The number of meat inspectors now employed by the FSA is now around 800—less than half the number employed at its inception.

The presence of horsemeat in food meant for human consumption in the UK was only discovered following testing by the Irish government food agency. The FSA does not routinely test for the provenance of meat, instead responding on an “intelligence-led” basis. The last time such testing was done was in 2003 when equine DNA was found in imported salami.

While it would appear that horsemeat entering the UK food chain did so as a result of imports, the danger of it originating from British abattoirs can only increase due to government proposals to relax inspections. Currently they are inspected by FSA officials, but under the proposals inspection would be by abattoir owners. Moreover, while efforts have been made to rubbish any danger from horsemeat, the real question is: if horsemeat is being routinely passed off as beef, what other substances are finding their way into the human food chain?



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