

European contaminated eggs scandal broadens

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The Fipronil scandal is broadening. Eggs contaminated with the toxic insecticide have now been found in many European countries and in Hong Kong. The European Union (EU) has announced a crisis meeting on the issue but has failed to set a specific date.

Fipronil is a highly powerful toxic insecticide produced by the BASF chemical company. The insecticide is approved for use in Europe to combat fleas, lice and ticks in animals. The chemical attacks the central nervous system and vital functions of the insects.

In tests on rats, neurological damage has been observed, and humans using the chemical are warned that in high doses Fipronil can cause nausea, vomiting and headache, as well as damage to the liver, kidneys and thyroid gland. Its use for animals used in food production is therefore strictly prohibited.

It now appears that a Belgian manufacturer added Fipronil to a harmless disinfectant and cleansing agent and sold the resulting product to hen factories in Belgium, Germany and the Netherlands. The mixture was also due to be exported to Great Britain, France, Poland and other countries.

The trace of Fipronil was uncovered when a Belgian processing company checked eggs in its laboratory and reported the findings. An entire month passed, however, before the authorities informed the public.

In the meantime, the scandal has spread to the whole of Europe, via the sale of detergents and the export of eggs. Fipronil has been detected not only in eggs, but also in chicken meat.

The European market is closely linked, and the Netherlands produces about half of all eggs for export across the continent. More than 11 million Fipronil-infected eggs have been delivered to Germany. In

addition, Fipronil-contaminated eggs have turned up in the UK, Austria, Denmark, Luxembourg, Sweden and Switzerland. They are also alleged to have been exported to Hong Kong.

The authorities have reacted by ordering the closures of plants and the destruction of entire batches of eggs. The prosecutor's office has initiated investigations into the producers of the chemical, suppliers and farmers in a number of countries. In Germany, supermarkets such as REWE and Lidl have removed entire batches of eggs in which contamination was found. ALDI removed all eggs from its shelves for one week.

Now, the governments of Belgium, Holland and Germany are accusing each other of responsibility and seeking to protect their own farms. On August 9, the Belgian farm manager Ducarme said that Fipronil-infected eggs had first been discovered in the Netherlands in November 2016. However, this was reported only internally.

In Belgium, the contamination of eggs by Fipronil was reported at the beginning of June, but the Belgian supervisory authority did not report the findings to the EU Commission until July 20, after consumers had already consumed the toxic eggs for six weeks, mainly in Belgium, Holland and Germany. On July 22, Holland halted the export of eggs to Germany and ordered the closure of six hen factories on the same day. By August 7, 138 of the approximately 1,000 Dutch chicken farms had ceased operation.

The Federal Institute for Risk Assessment (BfR) sought to undertake damage limitation alleging that the risk from contaminated eggs was low. An adult with a body weight of 65 kg could safely eat seven Fipronil-contaminated eggs every day without danger, BfR representatives declared in their test report.

The authors added, however, that "at the present

time,” there is no research regarding lifetime consumption of Fipronil residues via chicken eggs or chicken meat. The declaration makes clear that no attention has been paid to the long-term consequence of Fipronil over the years.

The BfR is not considered truly independent. Founded in 2002, the institute has been criticised on several occasions due to conflicts of interest between members of the advisory BfR expert commissions. Some commissioners were linked to ISLI, a lobby organisation in the food industry. Members of the BfR commission “Plant Protection Products and their Residues” were even employed by pesticide manufacturers.

Fipronil has already hit the headlines. Since 2004, the use of the substance in Europe has been repeatedly linked to a decline in bee populations. In 2008, the European Court of Justice dismissed a case lodged by several beekeepers against the authorisation of Fipronil. Since March 2014, seeds treated with the chemical can no longer be marketed or used because of the risk to bees. In France, plant protection products containing Fipronil are prohibited completely.

The victims of the scandal, first and foremost European consumers, have been left completely in the dark and have no way of checking whether they have consumed harmful eggs, possibly over a long period.

In its reports on the scandal, the media have failed to provide any real information about the extent of the danger and its causes. There has been little discussion about the appalling conditions prevailing in large chicken farms where the cramped cages provide the ideal breeding grounds for parasites to attack the already weakened animals.

Poultry and egg producers are clearly not interested in coming to grips with the scandal. The chairman of the Dutch poultry producers, Hennie de Haan, warned of a catastrophe resulting from an “overreaction”: “If it remains limited in time, it is still possible to catch up. But if it goes on for a longer period, the entire Dutch poultry and laying hens sector, including traders, will go bankrupt. One cannot just find a market for 4.5 billion eggs a year.”

This is not the first such food scandal. Similar crises have already occurred several times in recent years. Whether involving dioxin or glyphosate, salmonella or antibiotics, rotten meat, BSE or Fipronil, the food

scandals follow a similar pattern.

The crisis will dominate the media for some time until various culprits, so-called black sheep, are found and punished. Large amounts of contaminated food will be destroyed. Meanwhile, politicians and “experts” declare that the danger to consumers is low. In the end, responsibility is placed with consumers, who are accused of buying “cheap” food.

In reality, the agricultural policy of the EU is dominated by the demands of the capitalist system. The EU’s main task is not to protect the health of persons and animals, but rather to defend the competitiveness and export capacity of European agricultural concerns. In addition, the trimming of “bureaucracy” Europe-wide has reduced the capacity of authorities to control and test products on the market. State control authorities lack sufficient personnel to work effectively.

The latest egg scandal is systemic. Five years ago, at the height of the dioxin contamination scandal, the *World Socialist Web Site* wrote: “The transition from ‘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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