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Italy

Agricultural Situation

Dioxin in Italian Buffalo Mozzarella Cheese

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Report Highlights:

Low but in some instances violative levels of dioxin have been found in mozzarella cheese produced in the Campania Region of Italy. Italian health authorities act to reassure consumers that the product and problem are being controlled and kept off the market. GOI authorities have assured EU Member States, the US and other importers that none of the affected mozzarella has been exported.

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Authorities of the Government of Italy and the Italian Ministry of Health have been working around the clock in an attempt to reassure consumers, the European Commission and foreign markets that Italy's prized "mozzarella di bufala" is safe to eat. Over the past week widespread news reports revealed that Italian Health authorities had inspected scores of buffalo dairies and mozzarella cheese processors in the region of Campania, and had seized milk and cheese samples after tests had shown higher-than-permitted levels of dioxin in a minority of product. Buffalo milk is not for liquid consumption, but is used exclusively for making mozzarella.

While Italian Government officials deny that the dioxin levels found in mozzarella are linked to the piles of rubbish that have accumulated in recent months in the suburbs of Naples and the adjoining province of Caserta, government investigations in the past have drawn a link between higher rates of cancer in areas of Caserta and illegal toxic waste disposal. Scientists report that dioxin can be present in the air, water and soil, and an animal can also be exposed to it through feed, and/or grazing. Normally however, dioxin comes from by-products of industrial processes, such as waste incineration.

The Ministry of Health has tested buffalo milk and mozzarella for dioxin in 130 dairy facilities in the Campania region. Of these, mozzarella cheese in 25 facilities tested positive for dioxin (18 located in Caserta Province, 5 in Naples Province and 2 in Avellino Province). Further sampling is planned in all dairy farms located in the Campania region, with priority being given to the three provinces of Naples, Avellino and Caserta.

From the 25 cheese producers whose product was affected by dioxin, veterinary inspectors were able to trace the milk back to the 83 dairy farms from whence it originated. Milk sales from these facilities have been stopped, with the product being either frozen or destroyed. Feed formulas are being changed, given the strong likelihood that the dioxin contamination was due to local forage and feed. Further milk and feed testing will be conducted in order to discover the original source of contamination. Only in the event of negative tests for dioxin will milk production from the establishments in question be allowed for sale once again. Presently there are 25 cheese facilities under veterinary surveillance.

Italian authorities have gone to great length to promote their monitoring system saying that it is "extremely effective" and adding that "dioxin contaminated products did not reach the market". The Italian Ministry of Health revealed that the milk and mozzarella contamination levels that were found were at or slightly over the acceptable EU tolerance level of 3 picograms. (A picogram equals one trillionth (10^{-12}) of a gram).

Reports however noted that in order for the dioxin levels found to be dangerous, an individual would have to consume very large amounts of mozzarella (seven kilograms daily) over a long period. Domestic sales have, nevertheless, already fallen by 30 to 35 percent.

According to available data, none of the 25 affected cheese plants have exported to either other EU Member States or the US. Nonetheless, further inspections are underway on the distribution lists of products produced during the sampling period.

As is to be expected, the Mozzarella di bufala consortium has not only taken full-page ads in leading Italian papers stressing that their DOP branded mozzarella is both safe and quality guaranteed, but also organized a press conference for the Italian Minister of Agriculture De Castro complete with mozzarella tasting. Health officials, police, agricultural and cheese authorities have all said that the mozzarella produced by the DOP consortium is safe, and that the dairies involved in the police seizures were not members of their consortium. The

ads state, "buffalo milk — before being transformed into cheese — is placed under the most stringent health and chemical controls which guarantee the safety and quality of Campania's DOP buffalo mozzarella." While true, it is also true that the industry is going to be negatively affected by this dioxin problem for awhile to come.

Italy annually produces more than 33,000 tons of DOP mozzarella from the milk of some 250,000 buffalo, for a total value exceeding \$460 million USD. While most of the DOP mozzarella is consumed in Italy, 16 percent is exported annually, and this percentage is growing annually. Most of these exports go to other European countries. The United States imports more than 2,300 tons worth more than \$20 million USD.

Agriculture Minister De Castro has announced that the government has decided to stop the production of all mozzarella di bufala produced in Campania for at least ten days in order to allow for a thorough inspection of the facilities. In compensation for the loss of production and sales, the Italian government plans to award damages worth 20 million Euros to be spent in favor of promoting mozzarella di bufala in Italy and the world.

Comment: Given that the number and level of violative dioxin findings has been limited, and given the actions of the Italian Ministry of Health to assure EU, foreign and Italian consumers that the ministry is in control of the problem, it seems unlikely that consumers have or will have been placed at risk. Certainly there is every reason to believe that the DOP consortium-produced Mozzarella di bufala is above suspicion. Ministry of Health testing over the next weeks should confirm this. It seems, however, that there are broader environmental problems in the Campania Region that will need addressing. And there is a small irony that in the land of the precautionary principle a known carcinogen can be allowed at any level in foods, yet products containing unapproved biotech events ruled as safe by the European Food Safety Authority are kept out without tolerance. Sometimes principles are relative.