



USDA Foreign Agricultural Service

GAIN Report

Global Agriculture Information Network

Template Version 2.09

Required Report - public distribution

Date: 2/23/2005

GAIN Report Number: UK5002

United Kingdom

Food Processing Ingredients Sector

Sudan I contamination leads to biggest ever UK food recall

2005

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Report Highlights:

With the total still rising, thus far nearly 430 food products have been recalled in the UK after it was discovered they had been contaminated with Sudan I, an illegal food dye. The Sudan I dye, linked to an increased risk of cancer, was apparently imported in a chilli powder which was used as an ingredient to make a Worcester sauce that was itself then used as an ingredient in other products from sauces to ready meals. Early estimates indicate that the recall cost alone to the UK food industry will reach GBP100 (USD191) million.

Includes PSD Changes: No
Includes Trade Matrix: No
Unscheduled Report
London [UK1]
[UK]

On February 18, 2005 the UK Government's Food Standard Agency (FSA) issued a warning advising people not to eat certain batches of 359 products which it listed on its website (www.food.gov.uk) following the discovery that they contained Sudan I, a food dye illegal in the European Union (EU). It has since extended this list three times to a current total of 428 products with every expectation that more products will be added as the investigations into exactly which products contain the specific Worcester sauce as an ingredient continue.

Sudan I is a red dye used for coloring solvents, oils and waxes, petrol, and shoe and floor polishes. It is banned for use in food stuffs in the European Union since it has been shown to cause cancer in laboratory animals and these findings could also be significant for human health. As it is not possible to identify a safe level or to quantify the risk should consumers be exposed to it unnecessarily, Sudan dye is not considered safe to eat at any level.

Since July 2003, all chilli powder imported into the UK has had to be certified free of Sudan I, with the FSA and local authorities randomly sampling more than 1,000 consignments a year of imported chilli products. However, the importation of the batch at the core of this food scare predates this sampling program, and is thought to have taken place in 2002. It has since been used as an ingredient in a Worcester sauce product that itself has been used as an ingredient in a multitude of processed food products, predominantly soups, sauces and ready meals. Even so, the presence of the contamination eluded the domestic sampling undertaken by local authorities and was only discovered when the Italian authorities sample tested the Worcester sauce product when it was exported to Italy.

In addition to retailers clearing their shelves of the affected products and consumers being encouraged to return or destroy suspect food products, the catering industry is also removing the affected products from the ingredients in their menus.

While the food industry faces recall costs alone of over BPS100 (USD191) million, the FSA has moved quickly to calm the general public, emphasizing that the risk associated with the occasional consumption of one of the products contaminated with Sudan dye is likely to be very small and only frequent eating of such products over a long period of time would increase that risk. However, it still has some work to do convincing the media that this food scare could not have been prevented and to explain why it took 11 days from the alert being raised by the Italian authorities before any public announcement was made in the UK. The recall has also increased the awareness of an increasingly suspicious and distrustful general public to the diversity of ingredients in processed food products, a fact unlikely to be missed those who campaign against the food industry.