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Belgian Fipronil Crisis - Fraud or Food Safety

Report Categories:

Agriculture in the News

Sanitary/Phytosanitary/Food Safety

Poultry and Products

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Report Highlights:

The fraudulent presence of fipronil in eggs in Belgium is rapidly ballooning into an EU-wide crisis. Two months after the first notification of a potential food safety problem, the case appears to be more of an economic fraud issue and failure of the EU-wide food safety system than a food safety and a health risk concern.

Summary

The discovery of fipronil in eggs in Belgium and the ensuing scandal is now in the hands of European Commissioner for Health and Food Safety Vytenis Andriukaitis who stated the EU must “manage the situation, gather information... improve our system and prevent criminal activity.” Two months after the first notification made by Belgian officials of a potential food safety problem involving the insecticide fipronil, the scandal has ballooned to more than 16 countries in the EU plus Switzerland and Hong Kong. Criminal investigations are under way focusing on two firms: Poultry Vision, a pest control firm from Belgium, and Chickfriend, a Dutch poultry farm cleaning company. The Belgian Federal Agency for the Safety of the Food Chain (AFSCA-FAVV) has been criticized for mismanaging the case and failing to notify consumers and other EU partners in a timely manner. The new Belgian Minister for Agriculture Ducarme, in a special Belgian Parliamentary Committee hearing, fiercely defended AFSCA-FAVV and squarely put the blame for the slow progress in the investigation on Dutch unwillingness to collaborate.

Belgian AFSCA-FAVV Triggers EU Wide Fipronil Egg Scandal

On June 20, 2017, Belgium launched a rapid alert (an EU-wide notification) regarding the presence of fipronil in eggs in Belgium and possibly other EU member states. Fipronil is an effective and widely used insecticide on crops and pets, but the EU does not allow its use with food-producing animals. On June 3, AFSCA-FAVV was notified of a contamination discovered during a routine test at a Belgian farm. The scandal became public in late July, and soon after eggs were pulled from supermarket shelves. Belgian officials have been criticized for delayed communication between the first notification of contamination in lab results to issuing the EU rapid alert. Belgium has alleged the Dutch may have known about the contamination as early as November 2016. On July 24 the Netherlands shared the list of 86 Belgian poultry and egg farms which potentially had been treated with fipronil. All 86 farms were immediately shut down and to date 26 have been cleared and re-opened.

Belgian Testing

Because fipronil is a restricted substance, eggs and egg products from all farms exceeding the EU maximum residue limit (MRL) of 0.005mg/kg must be withdrawn from the market and destroyed. Only a few samples, most of them found in The Netherlands, showed fipronil levels above the acute reference dose. The AFSCA-FAVV is gradually widening the scope of its monitoring and testing effort for fipronil to all Belgian egg farms and egg processing plants. Wider monitoring and testing for fipronil at Belgian egg farms is hindered by lab capacity limits. Prior to the crisis the AFSCA-FAVV was not testing for fipronil in eggs, did not have accredited labs, and consequently was dependent on Dutch and German labs for the beginning phases of the investigation. Belgium is now working to test both chickens and eggs for possible contamination, even though poultry associations have made public statements that chickens raised for meat are not treated for mites since they have a lifespan of six weeks. The AFSCA has stated that before chickens are approved to be sent to the slaughterhouse, farmers that raise both egg-laying hens and chickens for meat must prove to the AFSCA-FAVV that they are fipronil-free.

Special Joint Belgian Parliamentary Committee Meeting

Following criticism from German Agriculture Minister Christian the Belgian government held a special joint session of the Belgian Economic Parliamentary Committee and Public Health Committee on August 9, 2017. At that session, Belgian Federal Agricultural Minister Denis Ducarme and Health Minister Maggie De Block replied to questions from Belgian MPs about the ongoing fipronil scandal (reftel). The joint session highlighted that AFSCA-FAVV could have done more to alert the government and press Dutch authorities for their reports on the contamination.

At the special committee session AgMin Ducarme and Health Minister Maggie De Block downplayed the scandal since none of the contaminated eggs had reached the market in Belgium. AgMin Ducarme put blame squarely on Dutch NVWA for refusing to collaborate for over a month. In the AgMin's view Belgium took all the right actions at the right time given the available information. AgMin Ducarme also claimed that the European Commissioner for Health had been aware of the Dutch NVWA report. During the committee meeting the Dutch NVWA denied the AgMin's accusations.