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**Briefing from the Food Standards Agency in
Northern Ireland and the Department of
Agriculture and Rural Development
to
the Committees for Health, Social Services and
Public Safety and Agriculture and Rural
Development**

**Incident Regarding the Discovery of Equine
and Porcine DNA in Beef Products**

12 February 2013

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SECTION 1 – Outline of Relevant Responsibilities

Overarching Roles

1. The Food Standards Agency (FSA) is the central competent authority in matters of food safety and authenticity in the Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. In England, responsibility for food safety lies with the FSA, and responsibility for authenticity lies with the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra).
2. The Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) has an overarching role of support for the agri-food industry and particularly for preparing the industry for future market opportunities and economic challenges.
3. Food businesses are responsible for ensuring that the food they supply meets the requirements of the law, and are expected to conduct some product testing.
4. The response between Northern Ireland Departments has been co-ordinated through the Food and Feed Incident Management Group, chaired by the Chief Veterinary Officer. This group has, to date, met three times on 17 January and 1 and 8 February.

Local Authority Controls

5. The majority of food law enforcement is delegated to local authorities throughout the UK who carry out checks of all food businesses in their area to ensure compliance with food safety, traceability, composition and labelling requirements of food law. Local authority controls take place at all stages of the food supply chain, including manufacturing, processing, packing, distribution and storage, to catering and retail.

Meat Hygiene Official Controls

6. DARD delivers meat hygiene official controls on behalf of the FSA in approved slaughterhouses, cutting plants and game handling establishments. This is governed by a Service Level Agreement with the FSA in Northern Ireland (FSA in NI). Senior officials from DARD and FSA in NI maintain regular formal and informal contact to ensure consistent and effective delivery to the agreed standard, and the FSA performs regular checks and independent audits in to ensure the quality of work delivered on its behalf. There is regular liaison between FSA in NI, DARD and District Councils relating to dual enforcement issues in meat establishments. This includes the sharing of audit findings, joint approval visits and regular meetings of an approval forum.
7. In Northern Ireland, District Councils are responsible for meat hygiene official

controls in relation to food safety in other meat processing establishments.

Beef Labelling Regulations (Northern Ireland) 2010

8. DARD is the competent authority in Northern Ireland for the Beef Labelling Regulations and is the policy lead in this area. DARD inspectors enforce the regulations, which provide customers with assurance about the origin of beef, in abattoirs and approved cutting plants insofar as they pertain to fresh and frozen cuts of unprocessed beef and mince.
9. DARD carries out extensive controls on the traceability of beef and beef products, both fresh and frozen, in abattoirs and approved cutting plants across Northern Ireland under the Regulations. These Regulations are designed to provide customers with clear, reliable information about the beef which is on sale. A key requirement of this traceability system is that it should enable the beef on sale to be traced back to where it originated.
10. District Councils are responsible for implementing Beef Labelling Regulations on processed meat products, in cold stores and at retail level.
11. Beef Traceability and Labelling in Northern Ireland was found to be satisfactory during the EC's Food and Veterinary Office audit of the UK in 2011

SECTION 2 – Context of the Incident in Northern Ireland

Slaughter of Horses

12. It is legal to slaughter and sell horsemeat in the UK and Ireland, provided it is from an approved abattoir, and the meat carries the official stamp declaring it is fit for human consumption.
13. There are currently no establishments slaughtering horses in Northern Ireland. The one facility that slaughtered approximately 40 horses every two weeks for export as carcass meat has ceased this operation. No horse meat was, or is, processed in Northern Ireland.
14. There are eight 'collection centres' licensed to handle fallen stock in Northern Ireland. Seven of these are connected to hunt kennels. These premises are approved and inspected every two to three months by DARD staff under Animal By-Product legislation. Facilities are inspected and records examined to correlate carcasses taken in with material disposed of.

DARD's role in promoting beef from Northern Ireland

15. Quality beef from Northern Ireland, reared on grass a grass based system has a justified reputation as a premium product and consumers can have absolute confidence that it is and totally natural and the highest quality available.
16. The traceability controls in our agri-food supply chains emphasise the benefits of consumers and businesses purchasing local produce, not only due to the environmental, economic and social benefits but also the integrity and safety of our produce.
17. The Northern Ireland Beef and Lamb Farm Quality Assurance Scheme, operated by the Livestock and Meat Commission, and extensive traceability controls throughout the supply chain assure our customers of the total integrity of our beef.
18. The Farm Quality Assurance Scheme sets standards for the care for animals and the farm environment. The Farm Quality Assured logo on a beef package or displayed at a butchers shop assures consumers that our beef and lamb is wholesome, safe and free from unnatural substances.

SECTION 3 – Detail of the Incident

Background

19. The FSA was made aware of the results of a Food Safety Authority of Ireland (FSAI) authenticity study into a range of meat products on 14 January 2013. This was a small survey conducted as part of FSAI's routine monitoring programme on the labelling of foods, specifically to check on the type of animal species in meat products. The survey results showed that a number of beef burger products manufactured in the UK and the Republic of Ireland contained horse and pig DNA. FSA in NI informed DARD of the issue on the evening of 15 January 2013.
20. The FSA launched an urgent investigation into the issues highlighted in the survey and initiated a four point plan for the investigation. This is being implemented by the FSA in conjunction with the food industry and other Government Departments, including DARD and Defra:
 1. To continue the urgent review of the traceability of the food products identified in FSAI's survey.
 2. To explore further, in conjunction with the FSAI, the methodology used for the survey to understand more clearly the factors which may have led to the low level cases of cross-contamination.
 3. To consider, in conjunction with relevant local authorities and the FSAI, whether any legal action is appropriate following the investigation.
 4. To work with Defra, the devolved rural affairs departments and local authorities on a UK-wide food authenticity survey on processed meat products.
21. The FSA has engaged with authorities across the UK and other Member States and interested parties throughout this investigation, including:
 - Engagement with representatives from food processors, manufacturers and retailers from across the UK. This includes a scoping meeting on 16 January 2013 and attendance by Northern Ireland interested parties via video link at a UK wide meeting with stakeholders on 4 February, on both occasions hosted at the FSA's office in Belfast. An outcome of the meeting on 4 February was that the results of industry testing of meat products will be published to provide a clearer picture of standards in the food chain.
 - Discussions with FSAI concerning the methodology of its study.
 - Engagement with authorities in other European countries regarding the traceability of the food products identified.
 - The FSA, DARD, the FSAI and the Republic of Ireland's Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) are working closely to share intelligence and progress the investigation.

22. Progress with the investigation has identified three strands to be addressed, as below. These three strands are being considered in conjunction with all relevant parties.
- The presence of trace levels of undeclared meat in meat products;
 - Labelling of meat products described as being free from pork;
 - Gross contamination of beef products with horse meat.

The presence of trace levels of undeclared meat in meat products

23. Following the results of the FSAI survey, the FSA initiated a controlled small-scale investigation sampling pre-packed frozen beef burgers, on 18 January, with a limited number of Local Authorities across the UK (Belfast City Council formally conducted the sampling in Northern Ireland, the samples they took are negative). The aim was to make initial checks of this sector of the market before initiating wider research surveillance activities.
24. The FSA has launched a formal UK wide food authenticity survey investigating the presence of undeclared equine and porcine DNA in meat products containing beef available at retail, wholesale and catering businesses, including wholesale businesses supplying schools and hospitals. Sampling has been taking place since Monday 4 February. Enforcement action will be considered based on the outcome of the tests and other evidence. The FSA has engaged with Defra, and made use of discussions with the FSAI concerning the methodology used for its survey in preparation for this study, which will be reported early in April.
25. The FSA has also instigated a program of enhanced food standards inspections of approved meat products and preparations establishments across the UK, with the program of work commencing on Wednesday 6 February. A program of targeted and intelligence led visits of cold stores across the UK is also being planned.
26. In Northern Ireland these initiatives are being carried out by District Councils. This program of work is being conducted with the purpose of ensuring that consumers' interests are being protected in relation to the declaration of species in meat products.

Labelling of meat products described as being free from pork.

27. The FSA was made aware of the discovery of traces of pork DNA in a selection of meat pies labelled as Halal by the Prison Service of England and Wales on the evening of Thursday 31 January. This is not a food safety issue, however it is totally unacceptable, particularly to those faith communities who abstain from eating pork.
28. The affected product was supplied by 3663 Food Services (a contract caterer) and

manufactured by McColgan's Quality Foods in Strabane. McColgan's became aware of the issue through awareness of FSAI's authenticity survey results and acted proactively to quarantine any product remaining on their premises. They also contacted 3663 Food Services in order for them to take appropriate action. McColgan's are approved for Halal production by the Halal Food Authority and are approved until July 2013.

29. In accordance with established protocols, the FSA in NI is working closely with Strabane District Council to investigate this incident to ascertain details around the supply chain and any necessary action to be taken. No further product entered the food chain after publication of the FSAI's survey results.
30. As noted above, responsibility for the authenticity of food lies with Defra in England. Defra is leading on matters associated with this issue and will hold a meeting with stakeholders on Kosher and Halal designations. This will include representation from Northern Ireland. The date has yet to be confirmed.

Gross contamination of beef products with horse meat

31. The results of the FSAI's survey showed that one sample contained horse DNA at 29% of the meat content. In the course of the ongoing investigation, significant levels of horse meat have been discovered in a number of meat products. It is believed that the raw materials are linked to suppliers in several European countries. All of the FSA's intelligence is being fed into the European Commission through their Rapid Alert for System for Food and Feed (RASFF). It is likely that this will become a pan-European investigation. An intense investigation into the traceability is still underway, and the FSA is working closely with the respective authorities. This is a very serious issue and evidence points to either gross negligence or deliberate contamination of the food chain. For this reason, the FSA is working closely with police forces across the UK and Europe.
32. The incident continues to develop at a fast pace. On 4 February the FSA in NI received results taken from a consignment of meat stored in the cold store at Freeza Meats, Newry. Of the 12 samples taken, two tested positive for equine DNA at levels between 60% and 100%. The FSA has ascertained that the product stored in the cold store at Freeza Meats was supplied by McAdams and was imported from the same Polish source as product from Silvercrest. It is believed that the meat had been destined for Silvercrest. This consignment has now been moved to a secure location and further detailed examination of this product will take place this week. As this meat was detained, none of this meat has been used as an ingredient in food that has entered the food chain.
33. On the evening of 4 February, the FSA in NI was informed by the FSAI that samples taken by DAFM from a Republic of Ireland company called Rangeland Foods

showed levels of equine DNA of up to 75%. The FSA is working closely with the FSAI concerning this line of the investigation, and special investigators from DAFM will be working closely with Newry and Mourne District Council and FSA in NI.

34. On Thursday 7 February the FSA was made aware that, further to industry testing, Findus beef products had tested positive for horse meat in excess of 60%. Findus recalled the product following concerns raised by Comigel, the French supplier, over the authenticity of the meat used in the products. This was followed by precautionary product recalls of beef products from Tesco and Aldi who also source beef from Comigel. The FSA was then informed on Friday 8 February of test results showing that Aldi beef products were found to contain between 30% and 100% horse meat.
35. Following investigations over the Findus products, the FSA issued a statement on 7 February requiring a more robust response from the food industry in order to demonstrate that food sold and served is what it says on the label. Food businesses have been tasked with conducting authenticity tests on all beef products for the presence of significant levels of horse meat, the results to be submitted to the FSA by Friday 15 February.
36. Engagement has taken place over the weekend 9 and 10 February between the FSA, Defra, Owen Patterson MP, Defra Secretary of State and representatives from the food industry to discuss this incident further. It was agreed that initial tests will focus on the areas of most concern, but that all products will be tested as part of the program and all results reported. Commitment was given for the FSA and the industry to work together to identify the best points in the supply chain to test as part of the ongoing program. The FSA in NI will meet again with industry representatives on Monday 11 February to agree this and other technical points.

Risk Assessment

37. The FSA has carried out a comprehensive risk assessment of the food safety risks associated with this incident.
38. The microbiological risk to human health from burgers in which equine DNA was detected is likely to be very low if the products are cooked thoroughly and if general food hygiene practices are followed (e.g. washing hands after handling the raw meat and avoiding cross contamination). As far as the FSA is aware, all of the burgers were sold frozen and freezing the raw meat is likely to have reduced the risk from parasites compared to unfrozen meat. In addition, the risk is likely to be negligible if the products and the meat used for their production originated from meat approved premises subject to official meat controls.
39. Phenylbutazone is not allowed in the food chain because it can cause rare cases of

a serious blood disorder, and based on the available evidence it is not possible to identify a safe level of residue in meat. It was banned as a human medicine following reports of an idiosyncratic reaction, not predicted by the pre-marketing studies. The highest reported levels in the FSA testing correspond to intakes about three orders of magnitude lower than the doses used in human medicine. However, because of the lack of association between dose and occurrence of adverse reactions, it is not possible to draw conclusions on risks associated with lower doses. In addition, the available evidence indicates a possible cancer risk, although any such risk would be very small at low levels of occasional exposure.

Communications

40. The interest of consumers is the single most critical consideration in the FSA's response to food incidents and the FSA is committed to open and transparent working. This incident has attracted significant media interest, and to ensure that consumers can have confidence in the steps that are underway to deal with the incidents, the FSA is providing a regular flow of information to the public by way of media appearances and web stories.
41. On Sunday 10 February the FSA issued interim advice to public institutions, such as schools and hospitals, caterers, and consumers purchasing from retailers in light of the developing nature of the incident. If public institutions are not satisfied with assurance from suppliers, then they should take appropriate action depending on the circumstances. Where evidence of authenticity is not produced, that action may include requiring the supplier to conduct tests, and reject or temporarily withhold stock, while waiting for results. Specific advice to consumers as at 10 February is:
 - Consumers are entitled to ask where the food has been supplied from and can then make judgements based on that information.
 - The evidence to date does not suggest there is a food safety risk. If further information indicates any health risk then the FSA will provide consumers with advice.
42. The FSA and DARD have ensured that the appropriate elected representatives in the UK's Parliaments and Assemblies have been kept informed of progress by way of regular updates and in answered Parliamentary and Assembly Questions, as well as verbal and written briefings.