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08 FEB 2013  
COMMITTEE

Ms Stella McArdle  
Clerk to the Committee for Agriculture and Rural Development  
Room 224, Parliament Buildings  
Ballymiscaw  
Stormont  
Belfast  
BT4 3XX

4 February 2013

Dear Ms McArdle

Thank you for your correspondence of 24 January 2013 in which you note that the Committee discussed the recent discovery of horse DNA in burgers sold in a number of major supermarkets.

The Committee has asked a number of questions, and I would respond as follows.

Progress on the investigation

The Food Standards Agency (FSA) was made aware of the results of the Food Safety Authority of Ireland's (FSAI) authenticity survey into a range of meat products on 14 January 2013. The survey results showed that a number of beef products manufactured in the UK and the Republic of Ireland have been contaminated with horse meat and pig meat. While there is no evidence to suggest that there is risk to public health posed by the information from the survey results, there may be food labelling regulation breaches identified

The FSA has launched an urgent investigation into the issues highlighted in the survey. The FSA has initiated a four point plan for the investigation and is implementing it in conjunction with the food industry and other Government Departments, including the Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (DARD) and the Department of Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (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.

10 A-C Clarendon Road  
Belfast BT1 3BG  
T 028 9041 7723  
E [infosani@foodstandards.gsi.gov.uk](mailto:infosani@foodstandards.gsi.gov.uk)



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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.

Specific actions as part of the plan include:

- Engagement with representatives from food processors, manufacturers and retailers from across the UK, including a scoping meeting held at our Belfast office on 16 January 2013.
- Engagement with stakeholders across the UK on 4 February 2013 to review the response to the incident – interested parties in Northern Ireland attended the meeting via video link from our Belfast office.
- The FSA's initiation of 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 is formally conducting the sampling in Northern Ireland). The aim is to make initial checks of this sector of the market before initiating wider research surveillance activities. This initial work will determine the scale of the issue and protect consumer interests.
- Ongoing discussions with FSAI concerning the methodology of the study. Outcomes of these discussions are being used in preparation for a UK-wide food authenticity survey on processed meat products.
- Engagement with Defra from 22 January 2013 to consider the UK-wide food authenticity survey on processed meat products. Sampling for the survey is scheduled to take place the week commencing 4 February 2013.

#### Authenticity testing

In Northern Ireland, risk based sampling plans which include authenticity testing similar to those conducted by FSAI are conducted by District Councils. The Northern Ireland Strategic Committee on Food Surveillance facilitated by the FSA in NI has published summary reports on food sampling activity in Northern Ireland with recommendations to District Councils on future sampling activity. The FSA in NI has not carried out any survey for horse protein (DNA) in meat products sold in Northern Ireland.

#### FSA in NI's contacts with officials across the UK and in the Republic of Ireland

The FSA in NI is part of the FSA as a UK wide body, and as such is fully involved in the UK wide response to this investigation. The FSA is committed to working in partnership with colleagues in other Government Departments, both in the UK and the Republic of Ireland. Actions taken as part of the four point plan include engagement between the FSA, the FSAI and the Republic of Ireland's Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) examining the traceability of the identified products. The protocol for

engagement between FSA in NI and the FSAI is set out in a memorandum of understanding between the two organisations on the handling of incidents

*Systems, procedures and checks in place in meat processing plants in Northern Ireland.*

The FSA is responsible for meat hygiene official controls in slaughterhouses, cutting plants and game handling establishments. DARD Veterinary Service, on behalf of FSA, delivers these controls in Northern Ireland. There is a permanent veterinary attendance in slaughterhouses to deliver these official controls, while other establishments are audited on a regular basis.

District Councils are responsible for official controls in relation to food safety at stand alone meat processing establishments (i.e. those establishments not integrated with a slaughterhouse, cutting plant or game handling establishment) and for the processing of meat products at all slaughterhouses, cutting plants or game handling establishments.

District Councils are also responsible for carrying out regular food standards inspections and checks at all meat processing establishments. The purpose of the inspections and checks, which include planned sampling programmes, is to monitor and verify food businesses' compliance with the requirements of food standards law and includes authenticity issues.

*Pork DNA detected in a selection of meat pies labelled as Halal*

I would also take this opportunity to inform the Committee of the discovery of pork DNA in a selection of meat pies labelled as Halal. The FSA was made aware of this incident on the evening of Thursday 31 January 2013. The products were supplied to the Prison Service of England and Wales by 3663 Food Services (a contract wholesaler) and manufactured by McColgan's Quality Foods in Strabane. McColgan's are approved for Halal production by the Halal Food Authority and are approved until July 2013. McColgan's became aware of the issue through awareness of the FSAI's authenticity survey results and acted proactively to quarantine any product remaining on their premises – all affected products have been quarantined. The FSA is working closely with the local authority and the food businesses concerned to investigate this incident. It is the responsibility of the food industry to make sure that the food people eat is what it claims to be on the label, and the FSA is providing leadership and direction, bringing the food industry together to ensure that their responsibilities are realised and acted on.

*The FSA's focus on the interests of consumers*

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. 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. The FSA has 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.

I am willing to provide further verbal and/or written updates to the Committee when new significant developments in the investigation occur.

Yours sincerely

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Gerry McCurdy', written in a cursive style.

**Gerry McCurdy**  
**Director in NI**  
**Food Standards Agency**

cc Maria Jennings (FSA in NI)  
Michael Jackson (FSA in NI)  
Dr Susanne Boyd (FSA in NI)