

The Horsemeat Scandal: Progress Made

April 2015

Introduction

This research note outlines the measures taken to prevent future cases of meat contamination by the European Commission, the UK Government, the Welsh Government and the Food Standards Agency since the 2013 horse meat scandal.

Background

In January 2013 the Food Safety Authority of Ireland published the results of a study which tested beef products for the presence of undeclared meat. Samples were taken from 27 different beef burger products. Tests showed that 37% of these samples contained horse DNA and 85% contained pig DNA.¹

Following this announcement the UK Food Standards Agency (FSA) conducted a series of tests on products being sold in the UK containing processed beef. A number of products from different suppliers were found to contain horse meat. In February 2013 the food company Findus announced that some samples of its beef lasagne which were tested contained 80 to 100% horse meat.² The supermarket chain Aldi also removed two beef products after testing showed horse meat contents of between 30 to 100%.³

¹UK Government, **Processed beef products and horse meat** (website) [accessed 9 March 2015].

² Food Standards Agency, timeline of horse meat issue website) [accessed 9 March 2015].

³ *ibid*

Since then a number of actions have been taken by both national and European authorities to address consumer concerns about the safety and authenticity of processed meat products.

Regulating Bodies

Most legislation regarding meat safety and standards is **European**. The UK Government is responsible for, and leads the discussion at a European level on food safety and standards on behalf of the devolved administrations.

The **FSA** is a UK wide independent government department which operates across the UK. It is responsible for implementing food safety legislation and official controls. It is accountable to both UK and Welsh Government Ministers.

Action taken by the European Commission

The European Food Fraud Network

The European Food Fraud Network (FFN) was established in July 2013. It aims to allow the European Commission and representative bodies from 28 Member States, as well as Iceland, Norway and Switzerland, to share information in order to deal with cases of cross border food fraud more efficiently. It conducts regular meetings and allows coordination of action where a food law violation concerns more than one FFN member.⁴

Horse meat/ DNA testing

Following the discovery of contaminated meat products the European Commission embarked on a series of EU wide tests to discover the extent of the problem.

Testing meat products for the presence of undeclared meat has shown a decline in the number of contamination cases since 2013. Of the 7,259 samples tested in 2013, 193 contained traces of

⁴ European Commission, **Horse meat: one year on actions announced and delivered** (website) [accessed 9 March 2015].



horse meat/ DNA above the threshold of 1%. This equates to **4.6%** of the samples.⁵

Of the 2,662 samples tested in 2014, from meat products in 28 European countries, 16 contained horse meat/ DNA. This equates to **0.61%** of the samples.⁶

Horse passports

New EU legislation⁷ has also strengthened the existing laws on horse passports. It has been a legal requirement for every horse to have a passport identity document since 2004. This passport lasts for the horse's lifetime. In addition every horse born after 2009 must also be micro-chipped.⁸

Under the existing legislation Member States are not required to store this identity data on a national database. In the UK the data is currently stored by several different privately managed databases belonging to the approved passport issuing bodies.

From June 2016, under the new EU legislation Member States must maintain a **central equine identification database**, which links to other Member States.⁹ The passport must be kept with the horse when it is transported, including transport within the UK. The passport must also indicate whether the horse can be slaughtered for meat.

The aim of the new legislation is to allow easier identification of horses which are barred from slaughter. This includes horses which have received medical treatment with **phenylbutazone** or **'bute'**.

Origin labelling for fresh meat

Country of origin labelling on meat packaging provides information on the country of an animal's birth, rearing and slaughter.

The EU has a compulsory beef labelling scheme.

⁵ European Commission, **Food test results** (website) [accessed 9 March 2015].

⁶ *ibid*

⁷ **OJ L 59, 3.3.2015** [accessed 9 March 2015].

⁸ UK Government, **Getting and using a horse passport** (website) [accessed 9 March 2015].

⁹ **OJ L 59, 3.3.2015** [accessed 9 March 2015].

Origin labelling has been a requirement for fresh or frozen beef and veal since 2000, when it was introduced as a measure to control the spread of BSE.¹⁰ The legislation also covers beef or veal mince (which contains less than one percent salt), and uncooked beef burger patties (where beef is the only ingredient).¹¹

From April 2015 origin labelling will be extended to unprocessed pig, poultry, sheep and goat products, including meat which is fresh, chilled or frozen.¹² However, for these types of meat the legislation excludes the requirement to display the animal's country of birth.

Origin labelling for processed meat

In the UK all the products found to be contaminated with horse or pig meat were processed foods. There is currently no requirement to label the country of origin of meat which is an ingredient in a processed food product. The term processed meat refers to meat which is used as an ingredient in a prepared product such as a sausage or burger, or meat which has undergone a process such as smoking or curing.

In February 2015 MEPs from the European Parliament's Environment Committee called on the European Commission to bring forward legislation to make it mandatory for processed meat in prepared food to be labelled with a country of origin. This would extend the legislation which requires country of origin labelling for fresh meat, to meat ingredients in processed food such as sausages and ready meals.

The European Parliament resolution stated the belief that:

...labelling the country or place of origin of meat and meat products does not in itself prevent fraud, but that a rigorous traceability system does contribute to detecting possible infringements and taking action against them...stricter rules

¹⁰ **OJ L 204, 11.8.2000** [accessed 9 March 2015].

¹¹ *ibid*

¹² **OJ L 335, 14.12.2013** [accessed 9 March 2015].



on traceability and consumer information are wanted by consumers... stricter rules on traceability would also enable authorities to investigate food fraud incidents more effectively.¹³

Work undertaken by the European Commission in 2013¹⁴ has shown that most consumers would support origin labelling for processed meat. The study¹⁵ found that over **90% of respondents want to know in which country the meat they purchased was produced**. Depending on the Member State, **30-50% of the meat produced becomes an ingredient in a processed food product**. Some farming organisations such as **NFU Cymru** have expressed support for these proposals, stating:

...clear labelling of these processed foods is essential to let the consumers know, not only what they are buying but where the ingredients actually originate from in the first place...Like the proposals in the resolution, we believe that labelling the origin of meat used as an ingredient in foods will help ensure better traceability along the food supply chain...It will also help create more stable relationships between meat suppliers and processors and increased diligence when food business operators choose their suppliers and products.¹⁶

¹³ **European Parliament Resolution for country of origin labelling for meat in processed food**, 4 February 2015 [accessed 9 March 2015].

¹⁴ European Commission, **Study on the application of rules on voluntary origin labelling of foods and on the mandatory indication of country of origin or place of provenance of meat used as an ingredient**, 10 July 2013 [accessed 5 March 2015].

¹⁵ *ibid*

¹⁶ NFU Cymru, **Resolution on country of origin labelling for meat** (website) [accessed 9 March 2015].

The European Commission has been reluctant to introduce mandatory country of origin labelling for processed meat because of food industry concerns that it could ultimately increase food production costs. A 2013 European Commission report on food labelling¹⁷ estimated that prices could increase by 15 to 50%, depending on the product. This view has been supported by the **Food and Drink Federation (FDF)** who argue that the new legislation would be too expensive and complicated to implement:

...legislation to require origin labelling would be burdensome to achieve; increase costs; contribute little to improving consumer information; further complicate the label; and would have no impact on food safety.¹⁸

MEPs have disputed these findings, citing a French study¹⁹ which calculated the extra cost would only be around 1.5 Euro cents for a product such as a frozen beef lasagne.

The European Parliament has called on the European Commission to undertake further analysis of its figures.

¹⁷ European Commission, **Study on the application of rules on voluntary origin labelling of foods and on the mandatory indication of country of origin or place of provenance of meat used as an ingredient**, 10 July 2013 [accessed 5 March 2015].

¹⁸ Food and Drink Federation, **Country of Origin Labelling, policy position** (website) [accessed 9 March 2015].

¹⁹ Euractive, **BEUC: Food labelling should include country of origin for processed meat** (website) [accessed 9 March 2015].

Action taken by the FSA and the UK and Welsh Governments

On 15 February 2013 the then Deputy Minister for Agriculture, Food, Fisheries and European programmes, Alun Davies released a statement outlining the communication between the Welsh Government, the FSA, DEFRA, the police and other stakeholders in the Welsh red meat supply chain. The Minister also declared the Welsh Government's intention to collaborate with, and support the investigation led by the FSA and the police.

In February 2013 the UK House of Commons Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Select Committee published a report²⁰ outlining the UK Government's and the FSA's role in preventing the large scale adulteration of meat. The report found that because of structural reorganisation within the FSA there was a lack of understanding about where the responsibility for food authorisation lay:

...the current contamination crisis has caught the FSA and Government flat-footed and unable to respond effectively within structures designed primarily to respond to threats to human health.²¹

The Troop Report²² was published in June 2013 as an independent review of the FSA's response to the horsemeat scandal. The report found that the FSA showed some hesitancy in its initial response to reports that beef products were being illegally contaminated with horsemeat. The report agreed with the findings of the House of Commons report that this hesitancy was likely due to a lack of understanding regarding the role of the FSA

²⁰ House of Commons Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Select Committee, **Contamination of beef products**, 12 February 2013 [accessed 9 March 2015].

²¹ House of Commons Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Select Committee, **Contamination of beef products**, 12 February 2013 [accessed 9 March 2015].

²² Professor Pat Troop, **An independent review of food standards agency response to the contamination of beef products with horse and pork meat and DNA**, June 2013 [accessed 9 March 2015].

alongside the various UK Government departments involved in food standards regulation.

In 2013 the UK Government commissioned the **Elliott Review**.²³ Whilst the Troop Report concentrated on the FSA response, the Elliott Review had a consumer focus. It was established to examine any systematic failures in food supply networks and their potential implications for food safety and public health, as well as consumer confidence.

When the Elliott Review report was published in 2014 the UK Government agreed to implement all 8 of its key recommendations. This included the establishment of **The Food Crime Unit**. The objective of the Food Crime Unit is to work within the FSA to monitor food safety and standards in the UK, including Wales.²⁴ The UK Government also committed to developing '**Centres of Excellence**' for food testing and to standardise testing methods between different laboratories.

FSA Testing

The UK food industry has continued to independently test meat products for the presence of horse meat/ DNA. In total 50,876 test results have been submitted by industry to the FSA since 15 February 2013.²⁵ Of these, 47 have tested positive for horse meat/ DNA, representing only 0.09% of the samples. **No beef products have tested positive for horse meat in the UK since June 2013.**²⁶

²³ UK Government, **Elliott Review into the integrity and assurance of food supply networks- Final report**, July 2014 [accessed 9 March 2015].

²⁴ UK Government, **Government response to the Elliott review of the integrity and assurance of food supply networks**, September 2015 [accessed 9 March 2015].

²⁵ FSA, **No horse meat found in latest industry and EU testing** (website) [accessed 9 March 2015].

²⁶ *ibid*



UK Arrests

As of March 2015, there have been three arrests in the UK which have taken place as a result of investigations arising from the horse meat scandal. None of the arrests relate to the presence of horse meat in supermarket products, many of which were manufactured in Europe. The arrests all followed spot checks conducted by the FSA.

Further information

For further information on about **the progress made since the horse meat scandal**, please contact **Nia Seaton** (Nia.Seaton@Assembly.Wales), Research Service.

See also:

- EU Commission **Food**
- **The UK FSA**
- National Assembly Research Service In Brief blog: **Putting a price on consumer confidence: MEPs request country of origin labelling for processed meat.** 10 March 2015.

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