Italian Farmers Protest Blue Mozzarella

Manufacturing.net

ROME (AP) -- Thousands of Italian farmers and farm activists massed at Italy's border with Austria on Tuesday to protest the importation into Italy of sub-quality foods claiming to be Italian.

The protest at the start of the Brenner Pass through the Alps was sparked by the so-called blue mozzarella scandal, in which imported batches of the creamy white cheese, a food Italians consider one of their country's hallmarks, turned blue because of bacterial contamination.

Last month, police seized over a ton of imported mozzarella from store shelves after reports surfaced around Italy that it began to turn blue after being taken out of its packaging.

The cheese was made in Germany, by the firm Milchwerk Jager Gmbh & Co., and identified as such on its packaging. But Italy's agriculture minister and the main farm lobby Coldiretti say they are incensed that such carelessness is, in their opinion, harming Italy's reputation as a quality food maker.

Although they were marked as made in Germany, Milchwerk's mozzarella brands had Italian-sounding names, such as Fattorie Torresina, Lovilio and Monteverdi.

Coldiretti says mozzarella is the most-purchased cheese in Italy, with Italians consuming 164 million kilograms (360 million pounds) a year, either to top off their pizzas or for use in caprese salads -- the popular summer salad of mozzarella, tomato and basil.

During the protest, border police inspected trucks bringing milk, meat and other products into Italy as farmers totting the yellow and green banners of Coldiretti cheered.

"We want to know what is coming and where it's going," Coldiretti said in a statement. "People who buy have the right to know if what they're buying is really made in Italy."

Agriculture Minister Giancarlo Galan attended Tuesday's protest, saying he would press for the final passage of new legislation requiring milk producers to give more details about the provenance of their milk. The proposed bill passed the upper Senate chamber but has not passed the lower Chamber of Deputies.

"A lot of things didn't work right in this case," Galan said in a statement. "They didn't work right in Germany and they didn't work right in Italy."

The health ministry in Rome has said it has received no complaints of illness linked

to the blue mozzarella. The German company has said a harmless germ found in groundwater was responsible for the blue hue of the cheese and had been filtered out starting in mid-May.

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