Food Agency Raids Slaughterhouse amid Horsemeat Scandal

SYLVIA HUI, The Associated Press

LONDON - British authorities on Tuesday raided a slaughterhouse and a meat processing company suspected of selling horsemeat labeled as beef for kebabs and burgers, shutting them down temporarily and seizing all the meat found.

It was the first time since the growing scandal broke across Europe that horsemeat being marketed as beef has been traced to suppliers in Britain, officials said, raising questions about how widespread the practice is.

Millions of burgers and frozen meals have been recalled around Europe and many accusations have been made, but so far it's not clear how horsemeat got introduced into so many beef products. French authorities have already pointed to an elaborate supply chain that involved Romanian butchers and Dutch and Cypriot traders that resulted in horsemeat disguised as beef being sold in meals like lasagna and moussaka to consumers around the continent.

Britain's Food Standards Agency said it suspended production at the Peter Boddy slaughterhouse in northern England's Yorkshire and a company it allegedly supplied horse carcasses to, Farmbox Meats, in west Wales. The agency said it was investigating how "meat products, purporting to be beef for kebabs and burgers, were sold when they were in fact horse."

"It is shocking that we actually found this practice going on within the U.K.," Environment Secretary Owen Patterson said.

Horsemeat is largely taboo in Britain and Ireland, though in France it is sold in specialty butcher shops. While no health effects have been reported, the scandal has unsettled consumers and made clear that unscrupulous dealers in the complicated network of meat wholesalers are benefiting from selling much cheaper horsemeat as beef.

Peter Boddy, the owner of the slaughterhouse, said he would co-operate with police, while the BBC quoted a spokesman from Farmbox Meats as saying "there is nothing we have done here which is not totally permissible."

Food Standards Agency director Andrew Rhodes said the companies appeared to be involved in "blatant misleading of customers." He declined to speculate on how long such alleged fraud may have gone on, saying only that officials have seized documents — including customer lists — from the two venues and are investigating how much horsemeat was sold as beef to how many people.

Horses are slaughtered legally in abattoirs across Britain, and the meat is exported to countries where horsemeat is eaten.

Meanwhile, authorities on the continent have not established where the mislabeling of horse as beef occurred.

In Romania, food safety officials said Tuesday that the country produced 6,300 tons of horse, mule and donkey meat last year, and that it was correctly labeled when it was exported from 35 authorized plants to other European countries.

Romanian officials have said the fraud occurred somewhere else down the line.

In rural Romania, horses are sold from individual households to abattoirs, and each animal has four sets of documents before the meat is exported.

The manager of a Romanian slaughterhouse implicated in the scandal, Doly Com, defended his plant on Tuesday and tried to assuage buyers' concerns about his company's meat.

"We have always watched closely the way we work here....and we can guarantee one hundred per cent that all the products Doly Com puts on the market are certified from a quality and origin point of view. One hundred per cent," said Iulian Cazacut, the plant's general manager, where horsemeat accounts for just five per cent of the plant's business.

No horse was being processed Tuesday in the plant in remote northeast Romania. Dressed in white overalls, their heads and mouths hygienically covered, workers pierced cow and pork carcasses with sharp knives, sawing off hunks.

The other Romanian slaughterhouse implicated in the horsemeat scandal, Carmolimp, has also denied wrongdoing.

An Irish food company has said that burgers found to be partially horsemeat were made from meat offcuts originating in Poland, but Polish officials denied the country had shipped horsemeat.

Sweden's food safety authority on Tuesday said it would test a wide range of frozen meat products sold in supermarkets to check whether they contain horsemeat and have been mislabeled.

Peter Bradenmark, head of food control management at Sweden's National Food Agency, told the AP that the agency would test about 50 to 100 samples from supermarkets nationwide.

"What's happened is alarming," he said. "Food companies are sincere and they want to do the right thing. But sometimes things go wrong unintentionally, and unfortunately, at times it's intentional."

Associated Press writer Nicolae Dumitrache contributed to this story from Roma, Romania.

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