Suspected Toxic Milk Taken Off Shelves

DUSAN STOJANOVIC & JOVANA GEC,Associated Press

BELGRADE, Serbia (AP) — Serbian officials ordered some brands of milk taken off store shelves Wednesday, despite earlier claims that they were safe and not dangerously contaminated with a potentially cancer-causing toxin.

The order came after widespread public outrage over allegations that health authorities have for weeks been hiding the results of lab tests which reportedly show that much of the milk sold in Serbia contains high levels of aflatoxins, a fungus linked to mildewed cattle feed that can cause cancer if consumed in high doses.

Authorities have not published a list of the brands that have been ordered out of shops, saying they were waiting for results of tests being conducted in the Netherlands.

"That's really outrageous," said Jelena Matic, a 45-year-old anthropology researcher from Belgrade. "How are we supposed to know which milk we can buy?"

Later Wednesday, the head of veterinary inspection, Sanja Celabicanin, said authorities have ordered the withdrawal of 50 types of milk, produced by nearly all Serbia's dairies.

There were no immediate shortages of milk in the shops, but some people are saying they will do without it for a while.

Suspicions of a government cover-up are fed by the region's widespread corruption and the cozy ties between politicians and industry.

An extremely dry summer last year provided conditions for the poisonous mold to grow, mostly in corn that is used as animal feed.

Very high doses are linked to cancer, especially of the liver, but experts say a person would have to drink a gallon a day for years to see any health effects.

Health Minister Slavica Djukic Dejanovic said there is no reason for panic and advised citizens to decide themselves whether to buy milk. "I drink milk. Obviously the citizens must decide on their own whether they will drink it or not," she said.

Goran Jesic, an agriculture official who broke the silence and published the results of the aflatoxin tests on Tuesday, demanded on Wednesday that the government also withdraw the cattle feed and instruct the farmers how to neutralize the presence of aflatoxins.

Agriculture Minister Goran Knezevic demonstrated his confidence in milk by drinking several glasses during a news conference on Tuesday.

But Jesic, who is in charge of agriculture in Serbia's northern breadbasket region of Vojvodina, said much of the milk sold in Serbia has higher levels of the toxins than allowed.

"We don't know which milk was pulled out and why, and they said it is safe," Jesic said. "The law envisages that where there is a suspicion, it has to be pulled out. If everything is as they say, then the dairies should sue them because they have withdrawn the safe milk."

Ljubisa Jovanovic, who runs a large dairy farm Belgrade, said that "not much was done to educate the milk farmers or to better the system of product control." In an interview, he said: "When it comes to health effects, the milk is absolutely safe to consume, and the issue at hand concerns only the raising of standards of quality of the milk."

Elsewhere in the Balkans, four brands of milk have been withdrawn in Croatia because of aflatoxin contamination. High levels of the toxin have also been found in

some samples of milk sold in Slovenia, Bosnia and Macedonia.

Slovenian authorities, however, said Wednesday that they did not find increased levels of aflatoxine in the milk and that more tests will be conducted.

Bosnia's border veterinary inspection was the first to sound the alarm in the region several days ago after regular tests revealed high toxin levels in milk imported from Croatia. This prompted stricter controls at the border, including taking samples from all milk shipments.

"I think this is due to wrong risk assessment by producers," said Ljubomir Kalaba, head of Bosnia's Veterinary Office. He said after last year's dry season, producers should have been more careful. "Producers probably decided to test about 10% (of milk) when they should have tested much more."

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Sabina Niksic from Sarajevo, Bosnia, Marko Drobnjakovic from Dobanovci, Serbia, and Konstantin Testorides from Skopje, Macedonia, contributed.

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