

France tops EU horsemeat fraud table and turns to national beef

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Tests carried out by the French authorities in the past two months as part of the EU-wide drive to detect fraudulent horsemeat in beef products have returned the highest number of positive results. More than 13% of French samples contained horse DNA – three times the EU average. France and Greece are the only two countries where more than one in ten batches of beef products were found to be adulterated. However, French labs detected no bute contamination.

In a joint statement on Tuesday, the French ministers for agriculture and consumer affairs said: "In all cases, investigations have uncovered a supply chain going through the Netherlands, which backs up the idea that most import routes for beef adulterated with horsemeat have now been identified."

Most horsemeat finds occurred in ingredients, rather than finished meals, and a partial explanation may lie in the method used by the French authorities. Ingredient tests specifically targeted companies linked to the Dutch-based meat traders linked to the temporary closure of the Spanghero company in southern France earlier this year, or consignments where the visual aspects of mince labeled as

beef appeared suspicious to inspectors.

Fabrice Lagueyt, a beef farmer near Bordeaux who sells his meat directly to the public, was not surprised by the results. "This is not the first scandal and there will be other ones – unless Europe tackles this," he said. In contrast with strict controls on French farms, Lagueyt considers traceability issues in the trade sector could not be addressed by national authorities alone. For his part, he has had "only positive reactions" since the beginning of the crisis. "People come to the farm, they see the cattle and they know what they are buying," he said.

The French government is due to introduce draft legislation next month to make the type of fraud associated with the horsemeat scandal punishable by five years in prison and fines up to €3 million or 10% of a convicted company's turnover. The ministers have again called for EU legislation on meat origin labeling for ready meals. In the meantime, they said they were working with beef processors and retailers to introduce interim measures by the end of May, including "the voluntary use and promotion of French origin-certified beef, pork and poultry in prepared meals" – a worrying sign from Irish beef's second largest export market.

Fresh producers' livelihoods in jeopardy

ANDY DOYLE

The livelihoods of Irish fruit and vegetable growers are in jeopardy and IFA are calling on retailers and merchants to ensure a fair system of procurement for Irish fresh produce.

The challenges of the weather and the market,

combined with ever increasing production and compliance costs, continue to erode producer margins.

This warning was issued by IFA's Soft Fruit and Vegetable committees.

Vegetable committee chairman Matt Foley warned that "significantly higher diesel and fertilizer costs have had

a dramatic effect on unit production cost in fruit and vegetables due to the extensive cultivation and harvesting required per acre".

He said that "some major retailers continue to engage in a relentless power battle for market share using fresh produce as a loss leader and forcing the cost of this back

to the grower."

"Irish consumers want locally produced Irish fresh fruit and vegetables", according to IFA's Soft Fruit Chairman James Kearns.

"While retailers recognise this fact, growers do not always get the support that retailers profess," Mr Kearns stated.

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LPT

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