

Cooking our goose in the global cauldron:

Pet Food Recall Spills Over Into Human Food Supply

May 22, 2007

With millions of livestock quarantined across the country, a massive recall that got underway last March is no longer just about pet food. What ostensibly began as a problem with a thickening agent used to make a “cuts and gravy” type of canned pet food has turned into one of the biggest scandals involving contaminated food in modern history. While the USDA issued delay-of-slaughter orders for chickens, hogs, and fish by late April, neither it nor its sister agency, the FDA, seem to know just how far two deadly plastics chemicals have seeped into the nation’s food supply.

Like a TV suspense thriller, the strange episode unfolded in late February when consumers began reporting sick pets to the country’s largest pet food manufacturer, Menu Foods. The company fed the tainted food to test animals, and about three weeks later contacted a Las Vegas-based importer, ChemNutra, asking about some shipments of imported wheat gluten. ChemNutra said it purchased

792 metric tons of this high-protein food commodity from a Chinese supplier between November and January, then resold to several pet food makers in the United States. Other ChemNutra clients included Del Monte and Nestle-Purina.

Proctor and Gamble, which owns the Iams and Eukanuba pet food labels, got reeled into the drama via its large contracts with Menu Foods to prepare both of those products. Over the next two months nearly 6,000 different products sold under 100 brand names were

recalled, encompassing both wet and dry food, as well as pet treats.

By mid April, a second tainted ingredient, rice protein, was identified. San Francisco-based agribusiness Wilbur-Ellis explained in a press release that an employee collecting a shipment of the commodity off the dock spotted a single pink bag among all the white bags. The pink bag had the word “Melamine” stenciled on it.

The company said it has received 336 tons of rice protein from China since last July. About half of that inventory was shipped to five pet food and livestock feed manufacturers around the country and Canada.

Diamond Pet Foods, which received the phony rice protein, issued a recall of Natural Balance canned pet food products containing venison meal. Smartpak Canine recalled its LiveSmart Adult Lamb and Brown Rice Formula when its product tested positive for melamine. Costco and Walmart also recalled products.

Eventually, a total of six food ingredients came under the radar at the FDA, which is responsible for monitoring most imported food. They are wheat gluten, corn gluten, cornmeal, soy protein, rice bran and rice protein concentrate. The ingredients are commonly found in such products as bakery flour, pizza dough, infant formula, vegetarian meals, and energy bars. The contaminated corn gluten was discovered in pet foods in South Africa and Namibia.

Regarding energy bars, the popular Berkeley-based Clif Bar company said none of these imported ingredients are used in their recipes. Clif Bar does purchase commodities from Asia, for instance exotic berries, because they’re high in anti-oxidants.

Few tests have been conducted on the affect of melamine on animals and humans, since the chemical was never meant to be eaten. Melamine is a by-product of coal processing and is best known as a type of plastic dishware. Toxicologists had documented kidney problems in rats, but the

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renal failure in pets was considered a mystery.

Then a Canadian laboratory discovered a second contaminate – cyanuric acid - during necropsies of the animals who died from eating the melamine. Cyanuric acid is a chemical used to clean swimming pools and may be created at the time as melamine, since both substances have similar chemical compositions. When combined in the digestive system, they instantly create insoluble crystals similar to kidney stones. Scientists believe that's what led to the pet deaths.

After weeks of investigation, the FDA made the rather stunning announcement in early May that all the shipments of wheat gluten and rice protein concentrate it had inspected were mislabeled. In both cases, the ingredient was actually wheat flour, according to David Acheson, the FDA's assistant commissioner for food protection. Neither the importers nor the food preparers evidently noticed the mistake.

Scientists speculate that the high nitrogen content of melamine and cyanuric acid causes food-products to test high in protein without revealing the actual source. The higher the protein content, the more money the ingredient sells for.

Seventy percent of the wheat gluten used in the U.S. food supply, both for pets and humans, comes from imports, mostly from Asia. In late 2005, Menu Foods switched from the U.S.-based MGP Ingredients and signed a 10-year contract with ChemNutra to take advantage of the lower-priced Asian imports.

The United States imports 13 percent of its food, or about 260 pounds per adult each year. Yet only 1.3 percent of the products are ever inspected. Of that tiny fraction, inspectors routinely

uncover tainted food commodities shipped from all corners of the globe.

"Beans from Belgium, jalapenos from Peru, blackberries from Guatemala, baked goods from Canada, India and the Philippines – the list of tainted food detained at the border by the FDA stretches on," writes Andrew Bridges of the *Associated Press*.

From China, the FDA detained 850 shipments of grains, fish, nuts, oils, spice and produce in March alone, according to Bridges' article. Among the products seized were frozen catfish containing illegal veterinary drugs, ginger laced with pesticide, and melon seeds tainted with a cancer-causing toxin.

Since 1997, the value of Chinese food imports to the United States has more than tripled. The Bioterrorism Act of 2002 requires American companies to notify the FDA in advance of all foreign food shipments. The agency follows what it calls a "risk-based approach", focusing on foods that pose a significant health risk, like shellfish. It also targets foreign exporters who have been problematic in the past.

Apparently that cheaper price was arrived at by spiking wheat flour with melamine and then calling it wheat gluten, the FDA and other scientists have speculated.



One of the two importers that circulated the tainted pet food, Wilbur-Ellis, has its headquarters on the 27th Floor of this California Street building downtown.

Incredibly, the agency says that of the 98.7 percent of commodities that go uninspected in the United States, it's the responsibility of the importer to make sure the food is safe. ChemNutra said it had relied on the product inspection sheets provided by the Chinese manufacturer. In a press release, the company's CEO added that he was "particularly troubled" at receiving the faulty information.

The sale of contaminated food is a misdemeanor under U.S. law. Menu Foods has announced it is suing ChemNutra for breach of contract, while dozens of lawsuits have been filed against Menu Foods.

It's not known how many animals have died from the tainted

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food. Menu Foods received over 300,000 complaints from consumers in the first month of the recall. The FDA said it received 8,000 complaints, including 4,000 reports of dead animals. Most of the initial 16 deaths the agency has confirmed were attributed to test animals at a Menu Foods plant intentionally fed the tainted products after the first consumer complaints were received. The company would later allege that the animals died during routine taste tests.

The Animal Protection Institute, an advocacy group, says that the corporation, which operates several food processing plants in the midwest, has routinely conducted tests for Iams and other pet food brands on animals who live in barren cages under callous conditions. API notes that Iams reduced lab animal testing by 70 percent last year after switching to the use of companion animals who live in employee's homes.

Menu Foods not only manufacturers Iams and Eukanuba, but Nature's Variety, Wysong, Innova EaglePack and Newman's Own Organics. None of these brands have been recalled to date.

A variety of small-label organic and other high-end pet foods were also not involved in the recall and have reported spikes in product sales since the crisis began.

For its part, ChemNutra assured worried consumers that none of the nearly 800 metric tons of contaminated wheat gluten it purchased from China had wound its way into the human food supply.

However, melamine subsequently turned up in pig urine in California, North Carolina and South Carolina, prompting quarantines and a recall of ham.

A poultry farm in Missouri also tested positive for melamine.

The USDA ordered an inspection of facilities housing some 20 million broiler chickens in several states after officials discovered the melamine-tainted feed had been shipped to facilities in several states. An estimated 50,000 pigs were quarantined in Illinois.

According to officials, those facilities who test positive for melamine are then subjected to an "animal exposure assessment".

So far, scientists have determined that quarantined swine were safe for human consumption. The FDA cites a test that measures levels of melamine in the tissues of affected livestock. Results indicated less than 50 parts per billion of melamine, which is said to pose a very low risk to humans.

The Chinese Connection

In China, none of the wheat gluten sold for domestic consumption has been recalled. While there were no reports of pet sickness tied to melamine in that country, Chinese officials said about 200 patients in a hospital became ill recently after eating a breakfast cereal that contained rat poison.

By coincidence, when the melamine contamination was first exposed here, researchers in New York had identified a chemical commonly used to kill rodents, aminopterin, as the culprit. Those results were later withdrawn.

Chinese authorities initially asserted that no wheat gluten was exported from the country. However, ChemNutra identified the Xuzhou Anying Biologic Technology Development Company as the source of its import. Xuzhou is located in an agriculture region that's part of Jiangsu Province, not far from the hospital where the poisoned cereal was found.

A news director for a local publication told David Bardoza of

Whenever they say 'risk-based approach', it often means they don't have enough staff to actually do the job. They're doing triage. They're trying to hit what's most important to inspect but they're missing a lot."

Caroline Smith DeWaal, director of food safety at the Center for Science in the Public Interest.

the *New York Times* he was unaware of the tainted wheat gluten problem. "And even if we had heard about the news," Li Ning said, "we wouldn't be able to report on it because it's negative news."

Xuzhou Anying's manager, Mao Liju, told the *Times* he had no idea how melamine had found its way into products shipped from his warehouse, insisting his company served as a middleman, and did not produce the wheat gluten.

However, *Times* reporter Bardoza discovered that Liju had placed ads on internet trading sites in recent months soliciting melamine. "Our company buys large quantities of melamine scrap all year around," one posting read.

After conceding in April that China does export wheat gluten and rice protein, Chinese regulators opened an investigation into the alleged melamine spiking in April and arrested Liju.

CNN later reported that the manager of another company, Binzhou Futian Biology Technology, which shipped the fake rice protein to Wilbur-Ellis, had also been arrested.

In Congress, Colorado Con-

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gresswoman Diana DeGette has introduced legislation with Congresswoman Rosa DeLauro of Connecticut that will provide the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) with the ability to require the recall of tainted food products. Under federal law, such recalls are voluntary.

“The government has mandatory recall authority for vehicles, toys, and a whole host of other consumer products,” said Rep. DeGette. “We should also have the authority to protect American families and recall food that is contaminated or is a health hazard.”

The legislation also requires foreign food importers to meet safety standards at least equivalent to those of the United States. It gives the federal government the ability to visit foreign plants, something the Chinese federal government has so far prevented.

The nonprofit Center for Science in the Public Interest (CSPI), has asked the FDA to ban all grain products from China until the agency can certify that the products are free of chemical or microbial contamination.

“If U.S. pets must serve as the ‘puppies in the coal mine,’ we urge FDA to heed the warning and take action now to ban grains and other grain products until the Chinese government and producers can guarantee that these imports are free of illegal and dangerous substances,” CSPI executive director Michael F. Jacobson and CSPI food safety director Caroline Smith DeWaal wrote in a letter to the agency’s director.

The group said the action is necessary given the FDA’s budget shortfall and lack of food inspectors.

To track the food recall or learn more about food safety, visit:

American Veterinary Medical Association **avma.org**

Food and Drug Administration **fda.gov**

Animal Protection Institute **api4animals.org**

Center for Science in the Public Interest **cspinet.org**

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