

Dioxin contamination scandal hits Belgium

Effects spread through European Union and beyond

By Richard Tyler
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Farms in Belgium have been ordered to destroy livestock that were given animal feeds believed to be contaminated with dioxin, a serious carcinogen. The European Union has ordered a complete ban on Belgian agricultural exports of eggs, chickens, pork and beef. All chickens and eggs exported after January 15 have been ordered destroyed and this may be widened to include pigs, cattle and other foods containing possibly tainted ingredients.

The contamination is thought to have come from tanks used to hold animal fats employed in the production of various animal feeds. The tanks were previously used to hold mineral and industrial oil, thought to be the source of the dioxin contaminant. Failure to sufficiently clean the tanks meant that the animal fats became contaminated with the dioxin-bearing oil residues. The tainted animal feeds were then supplied to hundreds of Belgian farms, and were also exported to France, Holland and Germany. In another case involving labelling and accounting fraud, the director of the Ghent-based firm responsible for supplying the contaminated animal feeds has been arrested and charged, along with other managers.

As well as a direct danger from livestock fed the contaminated feed, eggs, poultry and other meats affected are used in a large variety of processed foods. The crisis has started to affect jobs in butchery and the slaughterhouses, with layoffs starting at the end of last week looking set to widen.

The Belgian government has ordered the sealing off of about 1,000 farms believed to have given contaminated feed to farm animals. Special containers were set up in public parks for the disposal of products suspected of being tainted.

Belgian shoppers confronted empty shelves in shops and supermarkets over the weekend as the ban on

tainted goods took hold and stores were ordered to withdraw suspect products. Many consumers were forced to travel to neighbouring countries to complete their shopping.

The food crisis has precipitated a massive political crisis inside Belgium on the eve of European and national elections. Belgium's Minister of Health Marcel Colla and Minister of Agriculture Karel Pinxten both resigned on June 1, as the scale of the scandal became more widely known. They were bitterly denounced by many for having kept information about the contamination secret for several months.

The ministers come from the Socialist Party and Christian Democrats that form the Belgian coalition government. It looks likely that both parties will suffer at the polls next Sunday. The weekly British business magazine the *Economist* writes, "The party that could do best out of voter disillusion at Belgium's sloppy politicians is the far-right Vlaams ("Flemish") Blok."

Belgian consumers only became aware of the potential dangers when the government ordered shops to stop selling Belgian eggs and chickens last week. On June 2 the ban spread to the European Union as a whole, when the European Commission's Veterinary Committee ordered all poultry products from the suspect Belgian farms be destroyed. Belgian shops and supermarkets that had cleared their shelves of chicken and egg products—including fresh pasta, cakes and mayonnaise—on June 3, had to remove even more foodstuffs when it became clear that the contamination had also affected pork, beef and possibly milk.

The Belgian press has highlighted the impact of the scandal. *Het Laatste Nieuws* wrote, "Total havoc. This is a human and economic catastrophe. Our reputation abroad is ruined, the agri-industry threatened, thousands of jobs in danger, companies and traders in

difficulty.”

Belgium's main French-language daily *Le Soir* carries a long list of banned foods, and foods that should be treated with caution. These include poultry and eggs; all foods that contain more than 2 percent egg such as mayonnaise, soups, bakery products, cakes, biscuits, desserts; also foods containing pork and beef.

The newspaper comments that “The dioxin crisis plunges Belgium into a fog” and complains about the lack of official information, and contradictory reports forthcoming from the government and the authorities last week.

After a ministerial meeting discussing the crisis broke up at 11.30 p.m. on Sunday June 6, the prime minister still refused to give a precise number of firms that had been placed on the list of those affected by the contamination. “Belgium has had a weekend of uncertainty and suspicion. Consumers and businesses sought reliable information but only very seldom found it,” *Le Soir* wrote.

The paper reports that a phone line established for worried consumers took more than 10,000 calls on Friday, but had stopped answering calls by Sunday. “On a political level, the crisis continues to make waves. According to the Flemish agricultural organisation Boerenbond, the crisis will result in losses of approximately 1 billion francs [\$25 million] a day for farmers and the country.” The total cost could exceed \$700 million.

The French daily *Libération* writes, “In Belgium, the affair has taken on the dimensions of a national catastrophe. The country's agriculture and food business is banned throughout the entire world, including Asia and Africa.”

The acting EU Farm Commissioner, Franz Fischler, severely criticised the Belgian government for not informing EU officials about the problem as soon as it was known. All food containing suspect ingredients made since January 15 will have to be traced and destroyed. This is a massive undertaking, given that most processed foods only list the ingredients used, not the country of origin of every individual constituent.

The European Union committee of veterinary experts met yesterday to decide if Belgium has done enough to bring the crisis under control. The EU Commission has already ordered the destruction of millions of pounds worth of Belgian produce.

As well as the ban on Belgian agricultural exports within EU itself, the number of countries banning Belgian produce now includes Switzerland, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Oman and Hong Kong, South Korea and Singapore.

The United States has banned the import of potentially contaminated produce from the EU as a whole. This has caused bitter complaints from some EU countries only marginally affected by the Belgian events. The EU Commission called the US decision “disproportionate”.

The crisis is also causing political fallout beyond Belgium's borders. Dutch Agriculture Minister Hayo Apotheker resigned on June 7 following criticisms that he had not reacted quickly enough to reassure Dutch consumers. Several hundred farms in Holland, France and Germany have been placed under surveillance to check if there has been a possible contamination. Over 300 pig farms have been closed in the Netherlands, as they may have received supplies of contaminated feed.

Belgian Prime Minister Jean-Luc Dehaene rushed back from the summit of EU leaders in Cologne on Friday June 4 to deal with the crisis. As in the case of BSE-infected British cattle, the Belgian government's first priority has been to try and limit the detrimental affects on their agricultural sector. Issues of public health take second place. The new Agriculture Minister, Herman Van Rompuy, said there were “enormous economic consequences and I fear also budgetary consequences”.

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