

Processing

Massive pet food recall shakes the industry

A major manufacturer of dog and cat food in North America, Menu Foods Inc., recalled 60 million containers of wet food on 17 March 2007, after receiving reports of pets suffering kidney failure. The company has since expanded its recall and several other companies have also voluntarily withdrawn products from the market. Nobody would imagine that the biggest pet food recall ever would concern human health as well.

By Emmy Koeleman

Initial news in March reported the death of about 10 animals after consuming the infected pet food supplied to Wal-Mart, Safeway, Kroger, PetSmart and other retailers. The food that had been specifically targeted for recall was sold between 3 December and 6 March throughout the US, Canada and Mexico. Paul Henderson, president and chief executive officer of Menu Foods, was not 100% sure of what had happened. According to company spokeswoman Sarah Tuite, the recalled products were manufactured from wheat gluten, a source of protein that had been purchased from a new supplier. But what was wrong with the wheat gluten?

The contaminants

Approximately one week after Menu Foods started to recall the first batch of products, ABC News reported that the wheat gluten was contaminated with rat poison. A source close to the investigation told the news agency that the rodenticide (aminopterin), which the source says is illegal to use in the US, was on the wheat that was imported from China and used by Menu Foods in nearly 100 brands of dog and cat food. Investigators could not say whether this was the only contaminant or if it was present in all of the recalled food. A week later, the theory of the rat poison seemed false. Meanwhile, melamine (a chemical used to make plastic) was identified as the new primary suspect. It was still unclear how melamine, which is also used as a fertilizer in Asia



Approximately 100 brands of dog and cat food have been recalled since 17 March. Since then, things have been turned upside-down for pet owners, baffled over what food to buy their pets.

but banned for that purpose in the US, found its way into wheat gluten used in the production process, said Menu Foods CEO Paul Henderson. Nor was it clear why earlier tests identified rat poison as the contaminant. "We are angered that a source outside the company has apparently adulterated the product, causing this regrettable loss," said Henderson. He also stated that the contamination was found in Chinese wheat gluten provided by a new US supplier and has since been discontinued. The story continued in mid April when melamine was found to contaminate a second pet food ingredient: rice protein concentrate. The melamine in wheat gluten was used by at least six pet food and treat manufacturers. The contaminated rice protein concentrate was used to make a variety of Natural Balance Pet Foods products for both dogs and cats, and was recently added to the

dry venison formulas. Natural Balance recalled all its Venison and Brown Rice canned and bagged dog foods, its Venison and Brown Rice dog treats and its Venison and Green Pea dry cat food. Also, Blue Buffalo, Royal Canin USA and SmartPak have recalled their products containing the rice protein concentrate.

Pig and poultry feed

Around April 20, the pet food industry, livestock industry and consumers were again shaken by the discovery of melamine in pig feed at American Hog Farm in Ceres, California. Officials believe the melamine came from rice protein concentrate imported from China by Diamond Pet Food, which sold salvage pet food to the farm for pig feed. A few days later, FDA said farms in five other states (North Carolina, South Carolina, Utah, New York and possibly Ohio) would be inspected. "It potentially affects thousands of pigs," said Dr Stephen F. Sundlof, a veterinarian who is director of the FDA's Centre for Veterinary Medicine. He said officials are also checking a Missouri poultry farm to see if chickens ate melamine-tainted feed. How serious this may sound, there is little research on melamine's effect on humans, according to the World Health Organization (WHO), which does not classify the chemical as a carcinogen for people. Dr Mark Horton, state public health officer, said so far "evidence suggests a minimal health risk to persons who may have consumed pork" from the farm in California.

Human health concern

Now that human health is involved, it puts the issue in a whole different perspective. The FDA started to test grain-based protein products (for human use) for melamine to determine if the contaminant entered the human food supply. Wheat gluten, corn gluten, corn meal, soy protein, rice bran and rice protein concentrate are included in baby formulas, breads, pastas, cereals, pizza dough, protein shakes, energy bars and some vegetarian foods, according to David Acheson, FDA's chief medical officer. You can imagine how many products may have been affected. However, there is no evidence that melamine had been added to any ingredients other than those used in pet foods. The sampling by the FDA is intended to answer whether it "could have gone into other places that we don't yet know about."

Visiting China

US investigators do not exclude the fact that melamine has been intentionally added to pet food ingredients by Chinese producers. They say that the Chinese companies may have spiked products with the chemical so that they would appear, in tests, to

have more value as protein products. The amine in melamine can boost the protein level in tests because it has the chemical element N (nitrogen). It is also likely to increase the adhesiveness of the gluten. Melamine is not approved for use in animal or human foods and therefore any use of it would be illegal.

To determine what really happened in China, FDA investigators are visiting the Chinese plants where the vegetable protein ingredients were produced. Initial results from this investigation reveal that Xuzhuo Anying Biologic Technology Development, one of the two accused Chinese companies, has shipped over 700 tonnes of wheat gluten labelled as 'non-food' products earlier this year through a third party, a Chinese textile company. The 'non-food' designation meant the company's shipments were not subject to mandatory inspection by the Chinese government. This case confirms that Chinese feed suppliers may have been intentionally disguising the contents of their goods.

Regulatory review

The whole pet food recall also raises the question on how well the safety and quality of pet food is regulated. Questions arise: Are Chinese agricultural products exported to the US and elsewhere safe? In addition, the ability of US regulators to protect the country's food supply and the slow pace of efforts made by the Chinese government to aid the investigation is also worrying.

The case of pet food contaminated with a substance used in some agrochemical products demonstrates the interconnected nature of global trade, according to GlobalYale online. The US is a major developer, user and exporter of agrochemicals to the world and the leading exporter of pesticides to China. Global health and environmental problems long associated with chemicals for boosting crop yields prompted two international treaties, in force since 2004. By refusing to approve these treaties and join global safety standards, the US government cannot expect other nations to respect its own high standards. At the same time, the federal government in Canada asked the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) to review whether pet food should be regulated after the continued recalling of pet food products in the US and Canada and what action, if any, the government should take to better monitor the ingredients in pet food. The government also wants the CFIA to determine whether a system should be put in place to recall pet food and remove it from shelves more quickly. There is currently no recall system in place for pet food as there is for human food. Although not all the facts are clear, this massive pet food recall, probably the biggest ever, is definitely a wake-up call for global food safety. ●