Horsemeat and the food chain

THE crisis provoked by the horsemeat in ‘beef’ products scandal has followed a pattern that will be familiar to those who remember the Salmonella in eggs, E. coli and BSE food scares of the late 1980s and 1990s, with the important difference that, in this case, it has been driven not by concern about the risks to human health, which are generally considered to be low, but by anger that consumers have been misled. People are right to be annoyed about having been sold products that are not what they purport to be, and to question why the systems that are supposed to prevent this have failed. With investigations and food product withdrawals having quickly spread across Europe, the unfolding saga has certainly shed light on the complexity of modern food chains which, as Patrick Wall, former chief executive of the Food Safety Authority of Ireland, pointed out in an excellent article in Farmers Weekly last week, are only as strong as their weakest link.

After a slightly shaky start (see VR, January 26, vol 172, 2013, p 86), the UK’s Food Standards Agency (FSA) has made up lost ground, and the introduction of programmes of testing of meat products for horse DNA is welcome. However, questions are inevitably being asked about why more testing was not being done before the scandal erupted and whether the problem might have been prevented or come to light sooner if it had been.

Also welcome, following the development of a test that can be undertaken in 48 hours, is the introduction by the FSA of a ‘positive release’ system in the UK, which means that the carcasses of horses now have to test negative for phenylbutazone before they can enter the food chain. Less welcome was the news from the FSA last week that, of 206 carcases checked between January 30 and February 7, eight tested positive. The ability to treat horses with phenylbutazone is important in terms of equine welfare, and the UK’s Chief Medical Officer has made clear that horsemeat containing phenylbutazone presents a very low risk to human health. Nevertheless, news that some of these horses tested positive is concerning, for the simple reason that, if the horse passport system was working as intended, they shouldn’t have done. The situation is not made any better by the fact that the Veterinary Residues Committee has previously expressed concern about residues of phenylbutazone in horsemeat, and effort must clearly be devoted to ensuring that the system is made more robust. Under EU legislation, the horse is defined as a food animal. This has sometimes raised eyebrows in the UK, where horses are not normally knowingly consumed. However, one of the things the events of the past few weeks have highlighted is that horses can and do enter the food chain, whether legitimately or not.

The European dimensions of the scandal were reflected in visits by the Secretary of State at Defra, Owen Paterson, to Brussels and the Hague last week, reporting on his return that Europol, the EU’s law enforcement agency, had been engaged to coordinate efforts to help uncover the role of criminal activity. On February 15, the EU’s health and consumer affairs commissioner, Tonio Borg, announced that, at a special meeting of the Standing Committee of the Food Chain and Animal Health, EU member states had agreed a plan, which would be co-financed by the Commission, to test for the presence of unlabelled horsemeat in food products over the next one to three months, as well as for phenylbutazone in samples of horsemeat. He urged member states to ‘keep up the pressure in their efforts to identify a clear picture and a sequence of events’, pointing out that ‘Consumers expect the EU, national authorities and all those involved in the food chain to give them all the reassurance needed as regards what they have on their plates.’

For its part, the Federation of Veterinarians of Europe has called for more effective controls on foods produced from animals at every step of the food chain. It has also called for the establishment of an EU register for horse passports, to reduce the risk of horses that have been excluded from slaughter for human consumption being reintroduced into the food chain (see p 196 of this issue).

For the time being, effort is being devoted to solving the immediate crisis. Looking ahead, thought needs to be given to finding the right balance between market freedom and regulation, to better food labelling and more effective enforcement, and to developing food chains that are shorter, transparent and more manageable.


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