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**Horsemeat Revisited**

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The horsemeat saga in Europe is not over yet. Following the 2013 scandal, the EU Commission took a number of steps to stop food fraud. These include improved testing programs, a dedicated IT tool for rapid exchange of information and alerts, as well as increased financial penalties for violations.

The Commission’s latest measure to tackle food fraud will improve the bureaucracy: in September 2014, the EU announced a plan to tighten the rules on horse passports! All seven million of “equidae” in Europe will have a single passport with a unique identification number, also doubling as medical record. In addition, all horses born after July 2009 will be micro-chipped.

EU regulators have won a victory closer to the root of the problem, when a deal to curb speculation with food commodities was reached in January 2014. The UK made numerous unsuccessful attempts to block the regulation.

Last year’s scandal had uncovered an intricate maze of dealers and subcontractors in the food chain spanning from a slaughterhouse in Romania, traders in Cyprus and the Netherlands, processing facilities in France and Luxembourg, to the shelves in UK supermarkets. Given the price wars between supermarkets and thin profit margins, fraudsters and speculators were not driven to social responsibility.

Yet the Commission stopped short from requiring the disclosure of geographic origin of meat in processed foods and fresh meat. The measure was opposed by several EU members, headed by the UK and Spain, who argued that this information might restrict trade freedom, since consumers might not buy meat from certain countries.
A new round of tests conducted in all member states between April and July 2014 found traces of horsemeat DNA in 0.61% of 2,622 samples labeled as containing “beef.” In similar tests last year, horsemeat DNA was found in 4.6% of the food products. This is a measure of progress.

However, why do samples collected in seven different EU countries still show horsemeat instead of beef, albeit in a small percentage?

**UK on the Spot**

The UK was at the epicenter of last year’s horsemeat scandal. An independent study commissioned by the British government recommended “putting the needs of consumers before all others” and called for “urgent and comprehensive reforms” in the food network.

In the years leading up to the scandal, local authority and government spending cuts in England and Wales had left public laboratory services “facing an existential crises” with “cuts to the bone.” Supermarket audits were futile since they were preannounced. There was little investigation or prosecution of food crime, and there were no specialized policing units to tackle it, according to the report’s findings.

In September 2014, the UK government promised to adopt some of the report’s recommendations such as the creation of a food crime unit. It also vowed to conduct unannounced audit checks in the food industry, improve laboratory-testing capacities, and conduct better intelligence gathering and sharing of information among agencies.

The Food Crime Unit currently being set up within UK’s Food Standards Agency (FSA) is due to start operations by the end of 2014. It is modeled after a similar agency in the Netherlands, which conducted 24 major investigations in 2012 and seized €6.5m in criminal assets.

At a food fraud conference in October, the author of the report, Professor Chris Elliot, remarked that the current system still relies on whistleblowers in the food industry, regardless of the number of new practices such as testing in the country of origin.

Three million jobs in UK’s food chain are dependent on customer confidence in British food products.

*EuroPoint*: There may still be some horsemeat in your beef, but less much. The EU negotiated and adopted steps in the right direction to de-incentivize food fraud. The UK is also trying to serve its “customers” better.