



EUROPEAN COMMISSION - PRESS RELEASE

E. coli outbreak: EU withdraws Egyptian seeds from the market and temporarily bans their import

Brussels, 5 July 2011 – The European Union is withdrawing from the market, and temporarily banning the import of, certain types of seeds from Egypt after Egyptian fenugreek seeds were linked to the E. coli outbreaks (O104 strain) in northern Germany and Bordeaux, France. The decision follows a European Food Safety Authority (EFSA) report, published earlier today, establishing a link between the outbreaks and seeds from Egypt.

Health and Consumer Commissioner John Dalli said: *“Tracing back the origins of the E. Coli 0104 contaminations in Germany and France has been a key priority for the EU from day one of the crisis. The report published today leads us to withdrawing of some Egyptian seeds from the EU market and to a temporary ban on imports of some seeds and beans originating from that country. The Commission will continue to monitor the situation very closely and will take additional measures if necessary”.*

The measures

In particular, the decision provides that Member States have to ensure that all lots of fenugreek seeds imported from one Egyptian exporter between 2009 and 2011 are withdrawn from the market, sampled and destroyed. Also, the decision provides that imports of Egyptian seeds and beans for sprouting¹ are suspended until October 31.

The measures, which are applicable immediately, were supported earlier today by the Member States in the Standing Committee on the Food Chain and Animal Health (SCoFAH) following a Commission proposal on the issue. They will be reassessed regularly on the basis of guarantees offered by Egypt, results of laboratory testing and controls carried out by the Member States.

EFSA's report

The EFSA report establishes that one lot of fenugreek seeds imported from one Egyptian exporter is the most likely common link between the two outbreaks. The report does not exclude that other lots may be implicated.

¹ Seeds, fruit and spores used for sowing; leguminous vegetables, shelled or unshelled, fresh or chilled; fenugreek; dried leguminous vegetables, shelled, whether or not skinned or split; soya beans, whether or not broken; other oil seeds and oleaginous fruit, whether or not broken

EFSA also notes that –given the severity of the outbreaks and the absence of information on the means of contamination– it is appropriate to consider all lots of fenugreek seeds from the identified Egyptian exporter, and for the period 2009-2011, as suspect. In addition, the report notes that the contamination probably occurred before the seeds left the importer. The production or distribution process apparently allowed contamination with faecal material of human and/or animal origin. Where exactly this contamination occurred is still unknown, the report notes.

Background

The EU imports seeds for sprouting mainly from India and China. In 2010, the EU imported from Egypt about 49,000 tons of the types of seeds affected by today's decision (please see endnote). Their total value was over 56 million euros.

The German authorities first notified the Commission's services of an E. coli outbreak on May 22. All of the Commission's networks have been fully operational since then. For instance, the Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed and the Early Warning and Response System ensure rapid distribution of information throughout the EU.

On June 5, a group of EU experts went to Germany to provide assistance with the epidemiology and with verifying results and contributed to the investigations to identify the source of contamination. On June 10 and 11, the German authorities confirmed, through epidemiology and laboratory testing, that the specific E. coli strain (O104), which is responsible for the outbreak, was detected in sprouts from one farm close to the city of Hamburg.

On June 23, France notified that people in the Bordeaux area got infected by E. coli after consuming bean sprouts. Laboratory tests that followed confirmed that it was the O104 strain. Today's EFSA report establishes a link between Egyptian seeds and the outbreaks in Germany and France.

The E. coli (O104) outbreak is responsible for 48 deaths in Germany and one in Sweden. The total number of cases reported in the EU, Norway and Switzerland is 4,178.

For more information, please visit:

http://ec.europa.eu/food/food/coli_outbreak_germany_en.htm

<http://www.efsa.europa.eu>

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