

# Serving up safety



**Companies and traders have been known to mess about with food. They put things into products that are not on the label or take risks with safety. Does the Netherlands need to upgrade its safety control system or are these just isolated incidents and the price of a cheap and plentiful food supply?**

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Over a period of two years Dutch tycoon Willy Selten's meat company in Oss passed horsemeat off as beef. The horsemeat was mixed with beef and sold to 370 companies across Europe, where it was processed into pizzas, lasagne or meatballs and retailed through supermarkets and large catering companies. An easy way to boost profits, they must have thought in Oss. Horsemeat is cheaper than beef.

This is the biggest but not the only food-related incident to come to light in the last six months. In Germany free-range eggs were sold as organic eggs, maize from Serbia found to be contaminated with aflatoxins – highly carcinogenic substances from a fungus – was fed to Dutch cows, as a result of which aflatoxins ended up in the milk. The milk was quickly withdrawn but some of it had already been consumed. All these incidents make consumers wary. Is the Dutch food safety control system working as well as it should be?

'No, it is not,' says Babs van der Staak of the Consumer Association. 'It is unbelievable that Selten could carry on like that for two years before it was noticed. And it is not

the only time it has happened. A few years ago we discovered that some companies were selling water disguised as fish. A couple of salmon and eel producers in the Netherlands were adding cheese protein to smoked salmon and eels, which causes fish to retain more water. It is allowed but it has to be stated on the label, which was not the case.'

## **SAFETY STILL ADEQUATE**

The control on economically driven fraud, such as substituting horsemeat for beef, is inadequate in the Netherlands, says Robert van Gorcom, director of RIKILT Wageningen UR, where research is done on food safety. Funding cuts affecting the Netherlands Food and Consumer Product Safety Authority have led to diminished attention to honesty in business. 'But the monitoring of food safety is still adequate,' says Van Gorcom. Since the establishment of the EU's General Food Law in 2002, responsibility for food safety has been laid at the door of the companies themselves. They do their own quality control and have to be able to show where the >

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ingredients come from and check whether they meet EU norms. The NVWA carries out spot checks to see whether companies are adhering to these rules. The General Food Law is very much oriented to transparency and companies have to be able to demonstrate to the NVWA how often they conduct safety checks. If they come across something untoward they are supposed to report it and take action immediately.

‘Businesses monitor better and more frequently than they used to. That is reflected in EU reporting on incidents as well,’ says Van Gorcom. ‘More incidents are reported but they are becoming increasingly minor and are solved more quickly. Because of the increased transparency more incidents come to the attention of the public and it seems as though there is more wrong with our food than before the General Food Law. The more transparent the system the more the consumer finds to worry about.’

Tiny van Boekel, professor of Product Design and Quality Management at Wageningen University, part of Wageningen UR, agrees that food safety control is good in the Netherlands: ‘Our food has never been so safe. A hundred years ago, when the food processing industry was just getting going, there was much more messing around with products. It even posed a threat to our exporter status. The food manufacturers themselves then made sure a produce law was put in place. Since then the controls on food have got better and better. But you cannot achieve 100 percent certainty. If you want to monitor everything it will cost you a fortune. Consumers will just have to learn to live with the fact that they run a bit of a risk now and then.’

### HIGHLY CARCINOGENIC

Tinka Murk, professor of Environmental Toxicology at Wageningen University, agrees on this point and believes that consumers do not know enough about risks and real dangers. ‘Contamination of milk with aflatoxins is a nice example of a food safety incident that posed no danger to public health. Aflatoxins are highly carcinogenic, which is why safety checks for them are so important. But if you are exposed to them in very low concentrations, there is no danger. In this case the amounts of aflatoxin were well below the recommended toxicological limits of 0.5 micrograms per kilo of milk, and also below the even stricter legal norm of 0.05 mi-

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programs. So consumers had nothing to fear. It would be nice if the media would mention this as well and not exaggerate the dangers.’

Murk is less positive about food safety control in the Netherlands, however. ‘The control is OK but I feel it is borderline.’ Thanks to its budget having been cut, the NVWA no longer conducts many broad surveys of food safety standards in general. These might include studies to find out whether new production methods release new toxic substances into our food, or to monitor whether particular products are still safe. Without such testing, says Murk, ‘we could miss important developments.’

One example of an exploratory study of this kind is the monitoring of the quality of drinking water. The National Institute for Public Health and Environment (RIVM) noticed last April that drinking water companies are finding it harder and harder to extract the non-biodegradable residues of cleaning products, sun cream and drugs from the drinking water. ‘And that is an important finding that we need to address, but there is less and less funding for those kinds of studies.’

RIKILT director Van Gorcom confirms this. The EU system focuses on the ‘hazards’: the food sources which – due either to their origin or to the production method – pose the biggest risks of infection with a pathogen or toxin. There is less interest or funding for exploratory studies or monitoring. ‘That makes it difficult to get an overall picture of the quality of our food in safety terms.’

### REVERSING CUTS

How can food safety control be improved? Reversing the funding cuts at the NVWA would be a good start, believe most of those interviewed. More funding is needed for the control of economically motivated food fraud and for general monitoring of food safety. Additionally, in Van Gorcom’s the NVWA should be in charge of more of the procedures itself. ‘If a company reports an incident the NVWA leaves the research to the company itself, to save money. I don’t think that’s a good idea. It makes it possible for the company to evade the issue or to cover up the seriousness of the situation.’

A suggestion from the consumer association is that the food chain – from farm via processing to the shelf – needs to be shorter, with as few intermediate steps as possible before the food lands on the consumer’s plate. Van Gorcom puts the effect of this in perspective. ‘The length of the food chain does not in itself tell you anything about the reliability of a product. A product that you buy directly

from the farmer could have been messed with. He emphasizes the distinction between food chains in which something is added to the product at every stage – one company slaughters the chicken, the next makes kebabs from it – and those in which food products are simply passed on. ‘In the latter case, the food is more of a speculation product and the chances of carelessness are bigger.’

### KEEPING TABS

Saskia van Ruth, professor of Food Authenticity and Integrity at Wageningen University, who works at RIKILT as well, thinks certification for authentic food would help. ‘The label should tell you exactly where the ingredients come from, how they are produced and what has been added to them. That way we could safeguard the whole food chain.’

So there is no lack of ideas. But is anything going to really change? Probably, yes. The series of incidents such as those concerning horsemeat and aflatoxins led to a parliamentary debate on 14 March, in which minister of Public Health Edith Schippers and secretary of state Sharon Dijksma agreed to partially reverse the funding cuts to the NVWA to enable it to keep tabs on companies better, especially with regard to food fraud and monitoring in general, as well as to impose bigger fines on fraudulent companies and to shorten chains. One week earlier they also proposed setting up a taskforce on ‘confidence in food’ together with the meat industry and supermarkets. The taskforce would identify weak links in the meat chain and make concrete proposals for shortening chains.

The consumer association is pleased with the outcomes of the parliamentary debate but does not see the value of the taskforce. Van der Staak: ‘We see that as a job for the NVWA. Up to now taskforces made up of a mix of the business world and government have not delivered the goods.’

Van Boekel was not too impressed by the parliamentary debate. ‘More controls and shorter chains are just ways of dealing with symptoms, if you ask me. The key issue was not discussed, unfortunately, and that is that consumers are alienated from their food. They no longer know how it is made. If they knew more about that, they would be quicker to understand that something can go wrong now and then, and wouldn’t be so put out about the horsemeat affair. We should involve consumers in their food much more. Then they will appreciate it better and they will also understand that you have to pay a bit more for an honest cut of meat.’ ■