The Other Sudan Crisis

By ACSH Staff — April 11, 2005

This article originally appeared on http://www.techcentralstation.com.

Although the media coverage here in the United States has been non-existent, much of the world has been experiencing one of the great food scares -- and food recalls -- of modern times.

The epicenter of this latest food scare (described by the Economist as "the biggest food scare since the last one") has been England, where over 400 products have been recalled because of a "cancer risk." The purported culprit: a red dye dubbed Sudan 1, approved for use in polishes, waxes and solvents -- but not in food (here, it is banned from the food supply by the Food and Drug Administration).

The alleged problem began when a very large batch of chili powder somehow was contaminated with Sudan 1 and then was used widely in the preparation of Worcester sauce, which, in turn, was used in over 400 prepared food products -- everything from shepherd's pie to salad dressing.

The scare and recall was not limited to Great Britain. The Canadian Food Inspection Agency issued a "health hazard alert" for various chili sauces, and as this article is being written, the Sudan scare is heating up bigtime in South Korea and China. Indeed, the South Korean FDA has begun inspecting outlets of fast food restaurants after the Chinese operation of Kentucky Fried Chicken admitted that it had discovered traces of Sudan 1 in its cuisine. U.S. manufacturer Heinz reported traces of the dye in its Chinese products. The threat of a massive region-wide recall is becoming increasingly possible.

What is this spicy kerfuffle all about? The same old, same old.

In high dose, Sudan 1 causes cancer in rodents. Of course, as critics have pointed out, you would have to consume 800 liters of Worcester sauce every day for two years to get the amounts the rodents consumed (that is a lot of Bloody Marys). But if you believe a mouse is a little man, then you see a risk, even if the level of exposure is at a barely measurable level.
What is of great interest here is the fact that the British government -- specifically the UK Food Standards Agency -- seems to have orchestrated this scare/scam in a very self-serving, manipulative manner. Instead of telling the British people that the risk was purely hypothetical (myriad chemicals, natural and synthetic, cause cancer at high doses in rodents), the FSA appeared to hype the risk -- recommending that consumers "avoid eating any food known to be contaminated." Critics maintain that the Agency's zeal and excessive precautionary warnings represent a PR move to convince consumers that their government food watchdog agency was indeed doing their job -- and watching over their flock of nervous eaters. Similarly in Canada, the Food Inspection Agency was alarmist, warning consumers "not to consume the certain food products [which] contain a non-permitted color, Sudan 1, which is considered to be carcinogenic."

So batten down the hatches. The scariest food scare since the last one has already crossed the big pond and is looming over North America. Soon it could be playing on a grocery shelf near you.

COPYRIGHT © 1978-2016 BY THE AMERICAN COUNCIL ON SCIENCE AND HEALTH

Source URL: https://www.acsh.org/news/2005/04/11/the-other-sudan-crisis

Links