



Big Trouble, Little Chili

Sometimes the littlest thing can create the biggest problem. The Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) has reported that Sudan I and IV (a.k.a. scarlet red) are in a number of products imported from around the world, including the U.K., Pakistan, Lebanon and Thailand. Products affected include chili powders and seasonings, Worcestershire sauce and rice crackers to name a few. In the U.K., Sudan colour is in well over 600 products. The main culprit here can be traced to crushed or dried chili products and curry powders from India. These raw contaminated foods were used as ingredients in a Worcestershire sauce, which in turn was used to make other foods. The result is a cascading effect that compounded the original problem.

The U.K. Food Standards Agency is continuing its clean up efforts and may widen an already massive recall. In Canada, the CFIA has also reported Sudan I and IV to be in palm oil imported from Ghana. The Korea Food and Drug Administration has reported that it is not affected by the foods currently on the U.K. target list, but is currently investigating its food supply, particularly sauces in fast-food chains and pepper-type preparations imported from China. The Korean initiative was spurred on by the detection in February 2005, by Chinese authorities, of Sudan I in a pepper sauce and a spice preparation used in large fast-food chains. Contaminated products were removed from over 1,000 establishments.

South Africa is currently engaged in a massive recall of Sudan contaminated foods involving more than 1,000 stores and over 470 products. Other countries that are known to have imported contaminated food include Ireland, France, Denmark, Italy, Greece, the Netherlands, the Caribbean, Belgium, Austria, Switzerland, Cyprus and Malta. Not all countries have announced product recalls. The New Zealand Food Safety Authority, for example, finds the risk for anyone who has consumed food contaminated with Sudan to be so small as to be immeasurable and is downplaying any concerns.

Sudan colours are not sanctioned for use in foods sold in Canada, nor are they permitted in the U.S., U.K. and EU. Most countries have banned the colour from use in products

for human consumption. These dyes are used for industrial purposes in plastics and wax-based products such as floor wax and shoe polish. Sudan I is suspect, not proven, to be linked to a potential risk increase of cancer, particularly those in the liver. However, Canada and the U.K. don't consider the current situation to pose an immediate risk of illness, but are concerned enough to have products removed from sale and recalled. The greater concern is placed on long-term consumption of the colouring agent contaminant.

The global trade in spices and herbs is estimated at 500,000 tonnes and valued at about \$1.9 billion. About 46 per cent of that is supplied by India. The Indian Spice board, which regulates all exports, has stated the matter is under control. The Spice Board is under a great deal of pressure from the EU and the United Arab Emirates to get this matter controlled at its source.

The recent flurry of global activity on Sudan dye contaminated foods appears to have been expedited by the EU's Rapid Alert System. The matter, however, had been under close surveillance by the EU since reports from France in 2003 of Sudan I in chili products. The import of chili products into the EU must now be accompanied by a certificate demonstrating the food has been tested and is free of Sudan colour. The recent Sudan recall activity is largely related to raw materials imported in 2002, prior to the EU's import restrictions implemented in 2003. The matter is again under review by the EU and may result in other categories of foods being placed on the restricted list, which in turn may inspire more product recalls.

These types of issues are particularly frustrating as manufacturers have limited control over them no matter how good their practices are. A bad supply of ingredients that goes unnoticed can, as demonstrated in this case, have global consequences. Addressing these kinds of matters requires the cooperation of all suppliers in the food chain and authorities from around the globe.

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