



SeafoodSourceNews Supply & Trade Report: China's Animal Feed Tainted With Melamine

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Report: China's Animal Feed Tainted With Melamine



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Associated Press

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October 31, 2008 - BEIJING -- The industrial chemical melamine is commonly added to animal feed in China to make it appear higher in protein, state media reported, in what appeared to be a tacit admission by the government that contamination is widespread in the country's food supply.

The practice of mixing melamine into animal feed is an "open secret" in the industry, the Nanfang Daily reported Thursday, describing a process of repackaging melamine scrap into an inexpensive product called "protein powder," which is then sold to feed suppliers.

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The Web sites of the official Xinhua News Agency and the Communist Party mouthpiece People's Daily newspaper also carried the story, in a rare move publicizing information that reflects poorly on the country.

Four brands of Chinese eggs have been found to be contaminated with melamine this past week, and agriculture officials speculated that the cause was adulterated feed given to hens. No illnesses have been linked to melamine in eggs.

The discovery came just weeks after a crisis involving compromised dairy products that sickened tens of thousands of children and was linked to the deaths of four infants.

The scandal was blamed on dairy suppliers who added melamine, a chemical used to make plastics and fertilizer, to watered-down milk to dupe quality control tests and make the product appear rich in protein.

Melamine is high in nitrogen, and most protein tests test for nitrogen levels.

Health experts say ingesting a small amount of melamine poses no danger, but in larger doses, it can cause kidney stones and lead to kidney failure.

The deliberate addition of melamine to food and animal feed is forbidden in China. Its apparent prevalence highlights the inability of authorities to keep the food production process clean of toxins despite official vows to raise safety standards.

The Ministry of Agriculture and the General Administration of Quality Supervision, Inspection and Quarantine did not respond to faxed requests for comment. Phones rang unanswered at the Ministry of Health.

Chemical plants used to pay companies to treat and dispose of melamine scrap, but about five years ago began selling it to manufacturers who repackaged it as "protein powder," the Nanfang Daily reported, citing an unidentified chemical industry expert.

The inexpensive powder was first used to give the impression of higher protein levels in aquatic feed, then later in feed for livestock and poultry, the report said.

"The effect far more exceeds the milk powder scandal," the newspaper said.

The account was backed up by a manager at a feed company based in central China's Henan province, though he said the practice has been going on for even longer than reported — some seven or eight years.

The manager, who refused to give The Associated Press his name or other identifying details citing the sensitivity of the issue, blamed suppliers to the feed companies.

"It's the suppliers who do it to raise the protein level, because we put in the contract a requirement for a certain level of protein," he said. "It's very common that feed for egg-laying hens contains melamine. The suppliers add it because their ingredients for the feed are sold at a low price."

He added that his company's contract with suppliers bans them from adding melamine to their products.

Marion Nestle, a professor of nutrition, food studies and public health at New York University, said it was unlikely that humans would get sick from eating meat from animals raised on melamine-tainted feed, because the amount of chemical contained in a few servings of meat would not be harmful.

But "it shouldn't be in the food supply at all. It's fraudulent. And the animals really can't use it for nutrition, so it's not good for the animals," Nestle said.

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Associated Press researcher Xi Yue in Beijing contributed to this report.

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