

Winter Connections Now Published.

The latest volume of Connections has been published and is now available through the Association web site. This edition contains papers on the impact of foot and mouth disease on Australia, an examination of levy funded R&D in relation to the Australian dairy industry, a critique of triple bottom line accounting and commentary on the importance of maintaining Australia's' current quarantine status to the pig industry.

The weakest link in the chain...

The following story shows how one small oversight (or sleight of hand?) can have major impacts on others further along the value chain and speaks volumes for the chain philosophy. The breakdown in food safety outlined in the news item below is yet another in a series of food contamination scares in European.

In the agribusiness session of the food science conference on July 24th (Sydney) a senior figure from a leading international food company – during a discussion on organic v's conventional farming – pointed out that the strength of the organic market in Europe was not a result of consumers wanting to 'return to the old days', it was being driven by a reaction to the problems in the current food system. European food production is suffering a massive crisis of consumer confidence and the 'organic' movement is benefiting as a result.

The conventional food chain is now associated with so many negative images – contaminants, pollution and waste problems, factory farming, welfare issues, etc - that organics are seen as inherently 'better', but that the system producing organic food is seen as more trustworthy and 'safer'.

The clear message from the following news item is that food production is a sophisticated business and sophisticated systems have to be in place to avoid breaches of integrity. In this instance, the link with the pharmaceutical industry is ironic, as food production systems (at least in the western world) move towards requiring similar standards of product integrity.

Dutch farmers to seek damages from Ireland

Irish Examiner 7 August 2002

http://www.examiner.ie/pport/web/business/Full_Story/did-sgyrkafx72Yj6.asp

DUTCH farmers yesterday began slaughtering 50,000 pigs feared contaminated with an illegal hormone, and a group said it would seek compensation from two Irish companies. Pig farms around the Netherlands were shut temporarily after infertile pigs on one farm were found last month to have been exposed to the hormone MPA, or Medroxyprogesterone acetate, used as a human contraceptive or hormone replacement in menopausal women.

The potential exposure was narrowed to pigs on 27 farms which had been fed a syrup containing the hormone that originated in Ireland and was made into a feed additive in Belgium. All pigs on those farms are to be destroyed over the next 10 days, and their bodies disposed of as waste material.

Dutch Agricultural and Horticultural Organisation spokesman Jack Luiten said total damages to the farmers would include the cost of the wasted pork, and the closure of most of the 14,000 Dutch pig farms during the past month. "Costs will be in the tens of millions of euros at least, and probably over 100 million," Mr Luiten said. "We have decided to look where blame can be laid, and that is with those who are responsible for introducing MPA into the food chain," he said.

The hormone's path into pig feed has been traced to Ireland's Wyeth Medica, a pharmaceuticals manufacturer. In sugar-coating pills, Wyeth produced hormone-laced waste water, which it turned over to Dublin-based waste management company Cara Environmental Technology for disposal. Cara sold the water to a now-bankrupt Belgian company called Bioland, which in turn passed it on as treacle to Dutch feed companies.

However, it remained unclear who in that chain knew the sugar water contained the hormone, and when. Mr Luiten said the farmers' organisation believed Wyeth and Cara should have ensured the water was disposed of properly, and that it had sent letters to the two companies saying it held them responsible for the farmers' damages. He said the companies had both denied responsibility in initial replies.

Wyeth spokesman Peter O'Brian said his company properly informed Cara that its waste water contained MPA. Cara could not immediately be reached for comment, but has told investigators from the Irish Environmental Protection Agency it informed Bioland the water contained MPA. In a report, the EPA said there was no evidence of this.

More GMO strife.

And to prove, metaphorically, that beggars can be choosers, the following story highlights how far GMO hysteria can be used for political purposes – in this case at the expense of starving millions...

In Africa, suspicion of genetically altered corn - Nations refuse U.S. grain despite growing hunger

Originally published August 6, 2002 from the Baltimore Sun

JOHANNESBURG, South Africa - The U.S.-chartered cargo ship Liberty Star dropped anchor in South Africa last week loaded with enough emergency food aid to feed 2.4 million people for a month. For a drought-stricken region with 13 million people facing starvation, its arrival should have been a cause for celebration. But the ship's American-produced cargo has been greeted mostly by suspicion and controversy - because the 36,000 metric tons of food aid includes genetically modified corn. Zambia and Zimbabwe - two southern African nations grappling with widespread food shortages - are blocking the shipment of the grain to their countries, fearing that it may threaten the health of their people, the environment and their agriculture industries.

The United States insists that the corn is safe. Three other southern African nations also teetering on the brink of a famine have already accepted the grain: Malawi, Lesotho and Swaziland. "The food aid is the same food we eat at home," said Judy Moon, spokeswoman for the U.S. Embassy to South Africa in Pretoria. But African leaders say that what may be good for the United States is not necessarily best for Africa. Even in the face of a humanitarian crisis some political leaders are reluctant to change their views. "It is necessary to examine the maize before we can give it to our people, and I'm certain if it is found to be safe then we will give it. But if it is not, then we would rather starve than get something - toxic," Zambian President Levy Mwanawasa told Sky News in an interview.

The impasse over the grain comes as southern Africa struggles in the grip of one of its worst humanitarian crises. Flooding, drought and government mismanagement have combined to create a food crisis threatening 13 million people in six nations. Zambia has about 2.3 million people at risk of starvation. Zimbabwe remains the hardest hit with about 6 million people - half the country's population - in jeopardy because of drought and the turmoil created by the government's land reform policy of seizing white-owned farms for landless black peasants.

The United Nations World Food Program has asked donors for \$507 million to buy more than 1 million metric tons of food. The United States is by far the largest donor, pledging \$98 million worth of grain for the relief effort. According to the World Food Program, the corn in question meets its standards for human consumption. But the WFP is letting the United States and the recipients settle the matter themselves, while warning yesterday that delay could prove costly.

"We have to solve this issue," said Judith Lewis, regional director for World Food Program in East and Southern Africa. "There are too many people who are hungry. And there's no other place to go for food. And we need the food. And we need it now."

The primary concern for Zambia and Zimbabwe is that farmers will use the corn kernels not only to eat but also as seed for next year's crop. If planted, the corn - the staple food in southern Africa - may contaminate other corn with its genes, permanently altering the makeup of those nations' corn crops. Such developments could be devastating for African farmers struggling to increase agricultural trade with Europe, where there are restrictions on the importation of genetically modified products and livestock fed with genetically modified grain. Zambia accepted U.S. grain, but in recent weeks the government - with no set policy on genetically modified food - has decided to reconsider accepting future shipments.

Zimbabwe rejected its share of the same corn. Instead, it accepted a small donation of U.S. corn meal, which was considered safe because it could not be planted. Zimbabwe's President Robert Mugabe has refused to accept any other grain unless it is similarly milled. But no one can agree on who should pay for milling the thousands of tons of grain Zimbabwe needs and how it will be stored.

U.S. officials say that milling corn - at a cost of about \$25 per ton - is not part of the food aid package. And aid officials warn that cornmeal has a much shorter shelf life, making it difficult to build up food reserves for the worst months of hunger expected later this year.

None of this would be a problem if the United States delivered only nongenetically modified grain to these countries. But the different types of corn are not separated, U.S. officials say.

"That's simply the way our markets work. There's nothing we can do about it. If you want maize from the United States, that's what you get," Andrew Natsios, an administrator for the U.S. Agency for International Development, said during a recent State Department broadcast.

Critics of the U.S. food shipment insist that it is possible to earmark nongenetically engineered grain for Africa. But they also suspect that the U.S. may have a hidden agenda. "Is the United States dumping its GE [genetically engineered] maize on Africa that nobody else wants to buy? Are they trying to control our markets?" asked Andrew Taynton, a founding member of the Safe Food Coalition of South Africa, a grassroots group opposed to the use of genetically modified food. "I don't want the Americans to think we are not thankful, but Africans have to look at it differently," he said.

<http://www.sunspot.net/news/nationworld/bal-te.africa06aug06.story?coll=bal%2Dnews%2Dnation>
