MELAMINE-TAINTED FISH FEED SENDS SEAFOOD INDUSTRY SCRAMBLING

Last Wednesday Canadian aquaculture feeds producer Skretting announced a voluntary recall of a batch of its Bio-Oregon brand feed that was shipped to the USA. The previous day the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) had alerted Skretting that the company had received a shipment of melamine-tainted wheat flour. The shipment originated from one of the two Chinese companies implicated in last month’s tainted pet food scare that resulted in at least 17 dead pets and wide-ranging pet food recalls. Skretting quickly identified the batch of feed that had received the tainted wheat flour and initiated the recall.

Apparently Skretting was unaware of the potential danger because investigations after the pet food scare had pinpointed “wheat flour” as the tainted product, whereas Skretting’s shipment was mislabeled as “wheat gluten.” Retracing the supply chain, the shipment originated from the Chinese company Xuzhou Anying Biologic Technology, which along with Binzhou Futian Biology Technology, were the two companies implicated in the production of tainted pet food.

Melamine is produced from urea and ammonia, often as a byproduct in the production of fertilizer. Its applications include as a durable plastic in such products as countertops and paints, as well as glue, fertilizer and flame retardant. During the 1990s China became a leading producer of melamine. But overcapacity and rising feedstock costs (e.g. urea) have eroded the industry’s profitability, creating oversupply and stagnant prices. Melamine producers have therefore explored other applications for their products including reportedly selling waste melamine in powdered form to animal feed producers.

Unscrupulous producers mix melamine with wheat, corn, soybean or other vegetable proteins into animal feeds. The melamine costs a fraction of the price of genuine food protein and it artificially boosts the protein levels of their product when submitted to standard tests. They claim that in small quantities melamine does not harm animals, but regardless it is an illegal additive since it does not appear as an ingredient on the label.

Since Skretting’s announcement the seafood industry and health officials have acted quickly to reassure consumers that the recall applies only to the one batch of Bio-Oregon feed and that the potential danger to human health is minuscule. For example:

- In the corporate sector, US farmed salmon producer Smoki Foods issued a release saying that it had conducted an emergency inspection of its fish feed inventory and determined that it did not include any of the Bio-Oregon brand. Smoki also included a statement from its primary feed supplier EWOS that none of that company’s products contain Chinese wheat gluten and/or melamine.

- The Chinese government continues to question whether the melamine-tainted pet food that killed US pets originated from China. But in the background it has arrested officials at the two export companies implicated in the scandal.

- In Canada the Canadian Food Inspection Agency (CFIA) traced the tainted Bio-Oregon feed to 57 farms and hatcheries in Canada. Health Canada stated that fish raised on tainted feed does not pose a threat to human health because melamine is water soluble and therefore does not collect in the fish’s tissue and instead passes through in its urine.

- In Alaska the Department of Fisheries and Game (ADF&G) admitted that many of the state’s 34 salmon hatcheries used the Bio-Oregon feed, although it did not specify which ones. The agency said that hatchery fish raised on tainted feed posed even less risk to human health than farmed fish, as the melamine not only passes through their systems, but they only eat it during their infancy, after which they are released into the wild for two or more years before harvesting. Given the lateness of the season, ADF&G indicated it was unlikely that the hatcheries would be able to secure replacement feed before the salmon fry are released into the wild.

- Nationwide FDA officials announced that they have traced the contaminated feed to two commercial fish farms and 196 hatcheries. The agency added that fish raised on melamine-tainted feed pose little to no human health risk.

Implications for frozen seafood buyers:

- At first this looked to be a problem for the farmed fish sector. But since some of the tainted feed went to Alaskan salmon hatcheries, this issue affects both the farmed and wild sectors.
- Current information suggests that melamine-tainted fish feed poses no human health concern.
- Using melamine to boost the protein levels of animal feed without identifying it as an ingredient is illegal. If it unfolds that the problem is widespread and health authorities strengthen their inspection regimes, this could result in a period of upheaval in the fish feed sector.
- Most importantly this melamine scandal, coming as it does on the heels of the heavily publicized pet food scare, is a hit for seafood marketers in general, and marketers of farmed and hatchery-raised fish in particular.

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