

07.01.2011

Damage limitation in advance regarding dioxin is possible

The latest dioxin scandal in animal feed has clearly illustrated that control systems in the food industry only take effect with a delay and often only after considerable damage has already been done. After it became apparent that unsuitable mixed fatty acids used for producing animal feed had polluted laying hen populations and eggs the authorities in several German states introduced drastic immediate measures to limit damage to consumers and farmers: Lower Saxony cordoned off 1,000 laying hen farms and in North Rhine-Westphalia around 8,000 laying hens were killed. It appears that batches of animal feed polluted with dioxin had also been delivered to pig fattening farms.

The scandal causes huge economic damage

The latest animal feed scandal means huge economic damage for farmers, especially when sales bans are placed on their farms for long periods of time. They currently also bear the costs of investigations of residual pollution which must be carried out before their farms are allowed to supply the market again. The consumer has once again escaped with a black eye because the dioxin pollution was discovered in food thanks to functioning monitoring in the quality assurance system – albeit with an unnecessary delay.

But wouldn't it be much better from an overall economic point of view if polluted raw materials didn't get into the animal feed in the first place? Within the framework of SafeGuard and other projects the research network GIQS amongst other things deals with various measures for damage limitation in advance. According to current legislation, farmers are responsible for the safety of animal feed although they themselves only have limited control possibilities. The situation for animal feed manufacturers is also problematic: currently processes for detecting dioxin pollution are relatively cost intensive and complicated and therefore can not be carried out by every animal feed manufacturer for every batch during production. As a GIQS partner, for instance, the University of Bonn is currently testing procedures for simplified pollution screening, not least for dioxin. Within the framework of a SafeGuard project another working group is dealing with risk evaluation of pollutants in soils, plants, animal feed and food: here first of all investigating the intake of perfluorinated and polyfluorinated chemicals (PFCs) through the food chain.

Confidence building measures are required

Confidence building measures in cross-chain quality communication in Germany still require improvement. Following the last animal feed dioxin scandal in 2004 the Netherlands' animal feed industry seized the initiative by developing its own supply audit and raw material investigations, amongst other things by setting up databases for joint evaluation of mixed animal feed manufacturers. The Dutch GIQS partner Chainfood BV from Arnhem developed one of these systems for the Netherlands and is also participating in drafting a German solution. "Within the framework of the SafeGuard project we are trying to improve cross-border exchanges of experience on commercially backed and public quality assurance systems and to standardise control criteria and further develop them", explained Prof. Dr. Brigitte Petersen from the Department of Preventive Health Management at the University of Bonn.

"For instance, we aim to optimise testing processes through introducing industry-specific standards such as standard test sample records or expert opinions on samples."

In particular with regard to cross-border cooperation between Germany and the Netherlands in the agricultural and food sectors, GIQS can now look back on a decade of experience and numerous projects. The organisation was founded in 2001 by the agricultural faculties of the Universities of Bonn and Wageningen (NL).