

Drug residues in Horse Meat from Canada and Mexico

After the closure of all slaughter plants for horses in the United States in 2007, the number of U.S. horses transported to Canada and Mexico for slaughter increased significantly. Horses are not bred for food purposes in the United States and regularly receive substances that are not allowed for use in animals that will later enter the human food chain.

One of the drugs commonly administered to US horses is *Phenylbutazone*. Often referred to as *Bute*, it is a nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drug (*NSAID*) for the short-term treatment of pain and fever in animals.¹

In the United States and United Kingdom, it is no longer approved for human use, as it can cause severe adverse effects such as suppression of white blood cell production and aplastic anemia.² It is also suspected to be a carcinogenic. Many horses in the United States, especially race and performance horses, receive *bute*, and as soon as they can no longer perform, they are sold at auction and transported for slaughter in Canada and Mexico. The New York Times reported extensively on this on December 8, 2012.³

The report of the *Food and Veterinary Office of the EU (FVO)* about an inspection in Mexico in 2010 notes that the Mexican authorities can give no guarantee that the horse meat exported to the EU is free of drugs. The horse's last owner (horse trader) must simply sign an affidavit stating that the horse was given no substances prohibited in the EU in the last six months. The US agencies assume no responsibility for the authenticity and reliability of this statement. They are also not inspected by the Mexican authorities.

A renewed inspection of the *FVO* in 2011⁴ reached the following conclusion: "The guarantees given on horse meat exports to the EU are insufficient to guarantee that equivalent standards to those provided for by EU legislation are applied" Several of the substances banned in the EU were not tested for at that time at all; for example, *Phenylbutazone* in horse meat. Overall, the number of tests was evaluated by the *FVO* as limited, and some of the test procedures were not recognized by the EU. As a result, in the EU as well as in Switzerland, special import conditions apply to horse meat from Mexico. Every shipment of horse meat must be tested for residues upon entry into the EU/Switzerland.

The *FVO* report from another inspection in Mexico in June 2012⁵ states: "The systems in place for identification, the food chain information and in particular the affidavits concerning the non-treatment for six months with certain medical substances, both for the horses imported from the US as well as for the Mexican horses are insufficient to guarantee that standards equivalent to those provided for by EU legislation are applied. This is mainly due to the absence of verification by competent authorities of the validity and authenticity of the affidavits..."

¹ <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Phenylbutazone>

² http://www.veterinaryirelandjournal.com/Links/PDFs/CE-Large/CELA_Dec_2010.pdf.pdf

³ http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/09/sports/drugs-injected-at-the-racetrack-put-europe-off-us-horse-meat.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0

⁴ http://ec.europa.eu/food/fvo/rep_details_en.cfm?rep_id=2862

⁵ http://ec.europa.eu/food/fvo/rep_details_en.cfm?rep_id=2958

In Canada, residues of substances prohibited in the EU in horse meat are also a problem that the EU is well aware of. The FVO report from a 2010 inspection⁶ in Canada states: "Controls of veterinary drugs used in horses and residue controls were not considered to be satisfactory"

The last owner of the horse must sign a written statement (Equine Information Document - EID) and declare what drugs the horse was given during the last six months. In many cases, however, the last owner is the horse trader and no authority, either in the USA or Canada, checks this written statement and can guarantee its reliability.

To work around this problem, there are several feedlots in Canada where US horses stay for six months before they are slaughtered (Bouvry's Feedlots in Alberta). The FVO report from 2011⁷ states the following conclusion: "The national requirements implemented for the slaughter of domestic horses or imported horses kept under an approved horse feed lot programme, and the official controls performed give guarantees which are at least equivalent to those provided for in EU legislation. In contrast, for those horses imported from the US for direct slaughter, the documentation received was not reliable, with verification of the data contained therein only being possible by means of residue testing"

On 6/13/2012, doping agents were detected in laboratory tests in Belgium in horse meat from Canada (Clenbuterol and Phenylbutazone). A warning to the other member states to which the horse meat was sent was issued by the EU.⁸

On 7/9/2012, the *US Food and Drug Administration (FDA)* issued a warning letter to slaughter horse trader Andio, after one of the horses he shipped to the *Viande Richelieu* plant tested positive for *Phenylbutazone*.⁹

On 12/11/12, the *Canadian Horse Defence Coalition (CHDC)* released proof of race horse *Silky Shark* being slaughtered despite having been treated with *Phenylbutazone* earlier.¹⁰

The CFIA (Canadian Food Inspection Agency) has a bulletin on *Phenylbutazone* on its website. Consumers are reassured with the claim that Canadian horse meat is regularly tested, and the CFIA has a zero-tolerance policy for *Phenylbutazone* in food products. But how then is it possible that *phenylbutazone* residues were detected in Europe in horse meat from Canada?

Horse meat is produced under poor animal welfare conditions in the USA, Canada and Mexico and also poses a health risk to consumers. These are two good reasons to stop the imports.

⁶ http://ec.europa.eu/food/fvo/ir_search_en.cfm

⁷ http://ec.europa.eu/food/fvo/rep_details_en.cfm?rep_id=2836

⁸ https://webgate.ec.europa.eu/rasff-window/portal/index.cfm?event=notificationDetail&NOTIF_REFERENCE=2012.1078

⁹ <http://www.fda.gov/ICECI/EnforcementActions/WarningLetters/2012/ucm313462.htm>

¹⁰ http://canadianhorsedefencecoalition.files.wordpress.com/2012/12/proof_of_cfia_failure_dec_11_2012.pdf