Queen's University puts over 2,400 food scares under the microscope

EurekAlert

As the increasing number food scares causes consumers to question the safety of everyday food items, researchers at Queen's University Belfast have completed the first ever analysis of all the food recalls announced in the USA, UK and Ireland over the last decade.

The research, by Dr Antony Potter at Queen's Centre for Assured and Traceable Foods (ASSET) identified 2,439 food recalls over the past ten years including the recall of 380 million eggs in the USA in 2010 following a Salmonella outbreak at a farm in Iowa, and the 2008 pork recall in Ireland, which affect export markets in 21 countries around the world.

The research will be discussed during The Food Integrity and Traceability Conference taking place at the University this week (21-24 March). This international event, held in partnership with safefood, will showcase the latest developments in food safety and traceabilty.

Dr Potter said: "The number of food scares and product recalls has increased significantly in the past decade. Until now, however, there has been no international database to measure trends in food recalls.

"Our detailed analysis of recalls in the UK, Ireland and USA begins to fill that gap. It outlines how the frequency and severity of recalls has increased over the past ten years, accompanied by significant financial implications for food producers. The 2008 pork recall in Ireland, for example, cost the Irish economy an estimated ?125 million.

"Of the product recalls we identified, 68 per cent were detected during routine or spot testing by regulatory bodies, and only 21 per cent were detected by the company in question. Around one fifth (21 per cent) were in the meat industry, 12 per cent in processed foods and 11 per cent in fruit and vegetables.

"Most recalls (56 per cent) resulted from operational mistakes, such as incorrect labelling, the presence of an undeclared ingredient, or contamination during the production process. While biological causes, such as the detection of Listeria, Salmonella and E Coli were also a factor, a significant number of food safety alerts were actually due to food fraud and corruption by suppliers further down the supply chain. This highlights the need for food producers to invest in ensuring the traceability of their products back through the supply chain."

Dr Potter is one of 40 speakers from more than 20 countries who will address The Food Integrity and Traceability Conference this week. Professor Chris Elliott from

Queen's School of Biological Sciences has organised the conference.

Professor Elliott said: "Despite mounting evidence of the increasing levels of food fraud, and growing public demand for safe and authentic food, this is a topic that few in the food industry appear willing to talk about openly for fear of the repercussions for their brand.

"Food producers, however, should be reassured that major scientific advancements are being made to help detect food contaminants and minimise risks to the food supply chain. Scientists at Queen's are at the forefront of these developments, and we are willing to work with companies to put in place the latest techniques to detect and deter food fraud. Many of these techniques will be discussed during this week's conference."

The conference is jointly organised by Queen's and safefood, the North-South body responsible for the promotion of food safety on the island of Ireland. Dr Gary Kearney, Director, Food Science, safefood said: "The increase in the number of food scares since the early 1990's has had a negative impact on consumer confidence in the food supply chain. To restore confidence and allay consumer concerns, it is vital that new scientific methods are developed which can detect harmful toxins early in the production of food, thereby facilitating appropriate containment measures and ensuring consumer protection.

"This conference will highlight the latest scientific methodologies for controlling food safety hazards as well as the challenges to providing robust food traceability systems. These and other issues are essential to the provision of safe food and protecting consumers on the island of Ireland."

Among the conference highlights will be Professor Garry Lee from the University of Western Australia and TSW Analytical P/L, who will present a new traceability system being trialled in the Australian pork industry and its lessons for the UK and Ireland pork industry following the Irish pork contamination scare of 2008.

As the demand for organic food continues to grow, Dr Simon Kelly from Defra's Food and Environment Research Agency will present some of the latest techniques in determining the origins of food and whether or not those labelled 'organic' are truly organically produced.

Owen Brennan, Managing Director of Belfast-based agri-technology company Devenish Nutrition, will discuss the controversial EU ban on GM crops and its negative impact on ensuring a sustainable EU food production system; while Professor Peter Shears from the University of Plymouth Law School will speak about the lack of resources being invested in the fight against food fraud.

SOURCE [1]

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