

Echoes of PBB? Contaminated animal feed on four MI farms

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By Bonnie Bucqueroux

Farms, News

Farms received feed laced with high doses of lasalocid - 50,000 turkeys dead and 20,000 pigs delayed to slaughter

Four farms in Michigan were part of more than 100 farms in at least eight states late last summer that received feed laced with a potentially lethal residue of the drug lasalocid.

Of continuing concern is that the incident resulted in 50,000 dead turkeys and at least 20,000 hogs delayed to market – and chances are good that at least some pork from pigs that consumed the tainted feed made it to grocery store shelves somewhere in this country before the problem was discovered and halted.



Among the lingering questions the incident raises are:

- What about the people who may have unknowingly consumed contaminated food – what is the risk?
- Why didn't we learn more about this tragedy earlier?
- Could and should more be done to prevent problems like this in the future?
- Is this part of a larger problem with feed additives? In today's global world, many of those additives now come from countries like China. Is our current system capable of identifying and dealing with the threats before we eat the food produced from animals that may eat tainted feed? Or are we doomed to playing catch-up after the fact?

My apologies that this is a long and complex story, filled with science and jargon that I will try to translate. Please bear with me because it is an important story if you believe as I do that we are what we eat.

Trouble in Michigan

The first farm to experience serious problems was apparently the unidentified "index" farm in western Michigan where more than 10,000 turkeys died over a weekend. ("Index" is a term epidemiologists use to identify the first case that comes to official attention. The state and federal agencies involved are not releasing the names of any of the farmers or the two feed distributors, one of which is in Michigan, noting that they are not under investigation for any wrongdoing.)

According to State Veterinarian James Averill, the farmer immediately contacted the Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development for help. MDARD eventually engaged the USDA Food Safety and Inspection Service and the Food and Drug Administration.

Tracing the problem

According to Averill, the problem was ultimately traced to a feed additive allegedly manufactured and distributed by

Shur-Green Farms LLC of Ansonia, Ohio. The company's website says its mission is to be a:

... provider of comprehensive, environmentally friendly industrial food waste recycling services. We make it easy for you to do what's best for the environment and your bottom line by providing everything you need to responsibly dispose of industrial food waste.

Part of the time-consuming challenge in identifying the source of the contamination was teasing out whether the toxic substance that killed the turkeys came from the "dry" or "wet" components of the feed. Testing eventually confirmed that the problem was not in the dry feed but in the wet additive – apparently the "grease" or "oil" that Shur-Green marketed as being recycled from restaurant waste.

According to a voluntary recall issued by the company, which was published on the Food and Drug Administration website October 23, 2014, the product that found its way into the animal feed was a form of Soyoil called Lascadoil that contained high levels of a dangerous drug residue.

Lascadoil is a byproduct of the fermentation process used to make the sodium salt lasalocid. The drug is part of a class of drugs called ionophores, which are distinguished from antibiotics and antivirals. In this case, lasalocid is used to kill the coccidia parasites associated with coccidiosis, which often cause diarrhea in livestock and even dogs and cats.

Lasalocid is an animal drug used to treat coccidiosis in poultry, cattle and pigs. It is marketed for use in poultry as Bovatec, manufactured by the New Jersey firm Alpharma Inc., and as Avatec, made by Zoetis.

Lascadoil, which can contain high levels of residues made from making lasalocid, is banned from food use and is typically diverted for use as a biofuel. So how did it end up in the feed that poisoned those animals on a farm here in Michigan and elsewhere?

According to Averill, the FDA is continuing to investigate how that happened. He said that records that originally showed the shipment as authorized only as a biofuel or other non-food use appear to have been altered to say it was restaurant waste instead. Shur-Green does not produce biofuels, which raises obvious questions about how the Lascadoil ended up at its Ohio facility in the first place. If records were altered intentionally to disguise the fact the product contained drug residues, there could be criminal charges looming as well as potential civil liability.

A call to Shur-Green ended abruptly. When I asked the man who answered to speak with someone about the recall, the person told me that the only calls they were taking were about "liabilities," which they were directing to their insurance company. When I asked for the name of the insurance company, the man said that was only being given to those who had claims. When I asked for his name, he gruffly said, "Thank you" and hung up the phone.

Dangerously high levels

It appears that the two feed mills that distributed the feed in question unknowingly mixed in the contaminated oil thinking it was the same restaurant waste they had always received. Instead, the resulting feed contained levels of lasalocid far beyond what is allowable in medicated feed.

For turkeys on the ground that might be susceptible to picking up coccidia from the feces of animals infected with the parasite, the normal therapeutic dose of lasalocid for poultry would be 100 grams per ton of feed. According to Averill, regulations allow a range of 68 to 113 grams per ton. The level found on the index farm was somewhere between 1-1/2 to 2 pounds per ton. There are roughly 453 grams per pound, so the contaminated feed contained as much as nine times the recommended dose. A total of 450 tons of contaminated poultry and swine feed were destroyed, and a total of 50,000 turkeys died or were euthanized and then disposed of.

Part of the challenge in dealing with lasalocid in pigs is that the drug is not authorized for their use. Testing shows that the ration fed to growing pigs on that same farm was 1510 grams per ton, Averill said. Despite the high levels, the swine were not exhibiting any symptoms. No trace of the drug was found in the ration used to finish pigs, only that for growing pigs.

At issue then was what to do with the pigs. To determine how much of the drug was in the animals, 10 pigs were sacrificed, with samples were sent to several laboratories for toxicity testing. Nine had undetectable levels of the drug in their livers, while one showed 30 ppb (parts per billion) of lasalocid.

The withdrawal time for the drug (the time needed for the drug to clear the animal's system completely) is 28 days. So the USDA FSIS and FDA worked with the Michigan index farmer on a plan to deal with the affected pigs. The farmer agreed to withhold any pigs potentially exposed to the lasalocid feed from market for that 28-day period.



Pigs typically go to slaughter at 22 to 26 weeks old

Since the Michigan farmer in question normally ships 5,000 pigs to slaughter each week, a total of roughly 20,000 pigs were held from market for 28 days before being shipped. Averill said that he initially had concerns about the welfare of the animals held back from market, but the farmer assured federal and state officials that he had capacity to house the pigs properly.

At this time, the federal and state agencies involved consider the contamination issue at all farms nationwide resolved. Is it possible that some of the pigs were sent to market before anyone knew there was a problem? Does that mean that some people somewhere likely ate pork made from animals that had consumed the tainted feed? "Probably," said Averill, though he also said that he would have felt safe eating the meat himself.

Should the animals have been culled instead of sent to market? "That was not our call," said Averill. The FDA made the decision with USDA.

Also of concern is whether we would have ever learned about the problem if the turkeys here in Michigan had not sickened and died. If contaminated feed had only been fed to pigs, they might have continued to go to slaughter without anyone knowing.

I called Jennifer Smith, the spokesperson for the Michigan Department of Community Health, to ask about any health concerns for Michigan consumers. She said that she was unfamiliar with the situation but would check and call back. In a return phone call, she said that her department was not involved because it was being handled by the federal agencies.

A Google search shows little has been published about the case. There is the FDA posting of the Shur-Green voluntary recall notice, a PennState food safety posting and a post on a blog called Chick-Cite in Ohio.

The situation was an agenda item during the monthly meeting of the Michigan Commission on Agriculture and Rural Development's session on January 21, 2015. Friends in attendance from the Michigan Small Farm Council alerted me to the news.

Echoes of PBB?

As the person who wrote the first-ever article published in Michigan about the PBB poisoning of Michigan, this incident brings back disturbing memories. For those of you who may not remember or never knew, the PBB poisoning of Michigan remains the largest environmental disaster of its kind in this country's history.

In 1974, 30,000 cows in Michigan were destroyed when it was discovered that a fire retardant called PBB – polybrominated biphenyl – was fed to them in contaminated dairy feed. The chemical was mislabeled and mistakenly shipped from the Michigan Chemical Company in Alma to the Farm Bureau feed mill in Kalamazoo in place of a dairy supplement. The case remains the largest environmental poisoning of its kind in U.S. history. By the time the full scope of the disaster was uncovered, nine out of 10 people in the state had some level of that toxic substance bound to the fat in their bodies.

Let us hope that this current incident is completely resolved and is only a blip compared to the PBB tragedy. But

those of us who reported on that case have good reason to ask whether we have since learned the lessons that PBB taught us.

Many of us were outraged at how long it took for anyone outside a small circle of insiders to know what was happening. Farmer Rick Halbert, who had a background in chemistry, was instrumental in bringing the problem to public attention. But folks like me who reported on the situation felt that government officials and corporations involved in the agriculture industry in our state remained silent far longer than they should have.

From my perspective, those officials focused more on protecting the reputation of the food supply and the business of farming than on the health of the people eating that food. Assurances about the integrity and safety of the food supply began to ring hollow when we learned months had gone by while the problem continued to smolder.

While I am pleased that MDARD put the contemporary case on its agenda for the January meeting, I wonder why it took so long to go public. Why no news releases?

I am unhappy that federal agencies involved are not always as transparent as they promised to be. I am also concerned that they often seem to invest more in producing feel-good stories than in sharing news about problems and mistakes. In our public-relations-dominated digital culture, more people make money spinning bad news than in reporting it.

Also of concern is that I am not sure we have as many watchdogs now as we did then. I often say that I wish I had had the digital tools back then to tell the PBB story that we have today. But I also worry that today we have fewer journalists who are paid to find out and tell us what is happening. And too many reporters today seem to be pressured to tell nothing but good news or to produce “click-bait” stories on sports or entertainment instead of a serious story like this that takes time to dig out.

I am also concerned that both officials and reporters still fail to realize that a “farm” story is actually a “food” story that affects us all.

I remember the day that Michigan Farmer editor Dayton Matlick called me into his office to assign me that first story on how PBB had been identified in a load of Michigan milk. As I dug deeper, I realized how potentially dangerous the substance was, so after I turned in my story, I went home and threw out all the milk and cheese in my refrigerator.

Then I called some folks at the local newspaper and at a paper in Detroit with a tip. But they all dismissed PBB as “just a farm story.” “If you have any information about people, let me know,” one reporter said. “Our readers in Detroit could care less about cows.”

I hope we know better today. But what today’s story should tell us is that we know far too little about what goes into the animal feed that eventually goes into us. When animals eat substances that were not intended for them, such as PBB in cattle or lasalocid in pigs, the officials in charge basically have to invent testing protocols to determine whether eating the animal products is safe. Both PBB and lasalocid bind to the fat cells of animals that ingest them. Is testing the livers on affected pigs sufficient? Should tests have been run on the fat as well?

Wendy Banka, president of the Michigan Farm Council, earned her doctorate in cell, developmental and neural biology from the University of Michigan, and she questions whether testing the livers was sufficient. “Measuring lasalocid in the liver of pigs does not provide enough data to provide any kind of certainty that the drug has been removed from the animal,” she said. “To the contrary, that data only shows that it is no longer in the liver after 28 days.”

UPDATE (8:20 a.m. – 1-26-2015): State Veterinarian James Averill emailed that fat from pigs was tested but nothing was found.

We want agencies to be our watchdogs, looking for problems and preventing them – not just mopping up later.

One of the biggest changes in feed manufacturing in the decades since PBB is that additives are now more likely to come from places like China than domestic sources. If we think of the questions raised by the 2007 recall of pet

food laced with toxic doses of melamine from ingredients that came from China, I want assurances that our system to regulate feed additives is tough, well-funded and focused on prevention.

Farm stories are food stories, and we are what we eat. So I am happy that the cleanup appears to have worked well this time, but MI Food News wants to be part of the solution, so we will stay on the story. Please use the comments section to tell us what you know or the questions you want asked.

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Shady Grove Farm U.P.

January 26, 2015 at 1:30 pm

Thanks for your work on this Bonnie! It sure would be nice to know what happened to all of the dead turkeys, the contaminated feed, the names of the farms involved, how much of this "food" made it to grocery stores, etc. I am hoping that there are documents that are subject to FOIA. I look forward to more details regarding this cover up by our state agencies.



Jennifer

January 26, 2015 at 11:40 pm

Thank you for your work. It's so necessary.



Tara

January 28, 2015 at 12:11 am

Very well written article thank you for your hard work on this. I have to say this is very disturbing and my friends wonder why I don't eat meat



South Michigan Farmer

January 28, 2015 at 9:06 pm

Thank you so much for this article. Why isn't this on MLive, the national media, etcetera? And yes, I'd love to see the relevant documents FOIA'd. I see no reason the names of the involved companies and individuals should be kept hidden—just the opposite. Tax dollars were spent dealing with this mess, and the the public deserves to know the facts. Please contact me if a small contribution to make that happen would be helpful.



John G

January 29, 2015 at 9:11 am

Awesome article thank you! I have become a foodie over the past 2 years and limit my purchases of meat to a local grass fed farmers, local produce and "GASP" herd share raw milk. Resulting side effects are great health and mindfulness.

Part of my "epiphany" over the past 2 years I subscribed to USDA and FDA recall notices. It is shocking the things that go on and how the problem foods are well into consumers bodies before the issue is even detected. I urge everyone to subscribe to those notices it will really open your eyes to food factory issues.

Great Article!

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