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Turkey deaths trigger recall of contaminated oil product

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By KEVIN WALKER

Michigan Correspondent

LANSING, Mich. — Michigan and federal officials have concluded that grease and/or feed was the root cause of contamination that killed 50,000 turkeys on a farm in western Michigan last August.

In addition, some 20,000 pigs located on the same farm were affected and 450 tons of turkey feed were lost as well. State Veterinarian James Averill made the presentation on this at the Jan. 21 Michigan Agriculture Commission meeting. The culprit was a drug called lasalocid, which is used to prevent coccidiosis in poultry, and is approved for use in sheep and cattle as well. It is not approved for use in swine.

The Michigan Department of Agriculture and Rural Development (MDARD) was notified of the turkey deaths on Aug. 11. After an analysis at Michigan State University, the turkeys were found to have died from lasalocid toxicity. Turkey shipments were suspended at the farm beginning Aug. 13.

The USDA, Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and MDARD all coordinated a response to the event beginning Aug. 21. There was a joint investigation and eventually 450 tons of turkey feed were removed from the farm. The farm was cleared to begin shipping turkeys again on Aug. 28.

On Sep. 11, MDARD discovered 1,510 grams per ton of lasalocid was found in swine feed on the same farm. Lasalocid was also found in grease samples. Evidently, restaurant grease is either fed to pigs directly or mixed in with other feed ingredients and given to pigs.

Five thousand pigs are normally shipped from the farm each week. The FDA recommended affected pigs be withheld from the market for 28 days in order to allow enough time for the drug to leave the pigs' bodies. The farm agreed not to ship pigs to market; 20,000 were affected. The withdrawal started on Sept. 16. "The product was sold as Lascadoil, which is used in the biofuel industry," Averill said. "Somehow it got labeled as soy oil and then got used as feed. The farmer had no idea it was Lascadoil."

Averill explained Lascadoil is a byproduct of the manufacture of the drug lasalocid and trace amounts of the drug can be found in it. He said that's why the turkeys overdosed on the drug and died. Averill refused to say who the farmer in question is, stating farmers' identities are protected in these situations under state law. Among the presentation's other findings is that a Michigan grease supplier shipped contaminated grease to 13 locations in four states; also, more than 100 farms in at least eight states received contaminated grease and/or feed.

Shur-Green Farms of Ansonia, Ohio, appears to have been involved. "Recycling services" recycle restaurant grease and then ship it to various purchasers, including feed manufacturers, according to the MDARD PowerPoint presentation given Jan. 21. The presentation doesn't identify Shur-Green Farms.

Averill said he doesn't know the extent of Shur-Green's involvement, but an FDA press release from Oct. 23 states Shur-Green Farms voluntarily recalled loads of soy oil containing Lascadoil, which "may have been used as a feed ingredient. This voluntary recall is the result of deaths of turkeys."

The recall included loads of product sold on or before Sept. 17 in the United States. The release goes on to state consumers that have recalled product should contact Shur-Green Farms to arrange for return.

"If you or any of your customers may have further distributed this oil, please be notified we are recalling this product

for improper labeling and for reports of deaths in turkeys associated with feeding this oil. This product is only permitted for biofuels. If you know this product has been used for purposes other than biofuels, please call your customer to cease this use immediately," it stated.

"To date, the company has received adverse event reports or product complaints attributable to the levels of lasalocid sodium in the oil. This may be harmful to poultry or livestock. As such, the company is conducting a voluntary recall as a safety precaution and will continue to closely monitor for reports of adverse events and product complaints."

The press release also provides a Shur-Green contact number of 937-459-2768. A call made to Shur-Green last week went unanswered and a voicemail message was not returned as of press time.

"There is a potential that some pigs got into the food chain," Averill explained. "This is not a public health issue. The system worked. I would feed such hogs to my family. We thought the 28 days withdrawal was more than adequate."

When asked why MDARD never put out a press release about this event, Averill said it was because federal officials were the lead investigators. "Hopefully in the very near future we'll have more answers that we can share," he added.

Michigan Small Farm Council President Wendy Banka was at the Michigan Agriculture Commission meeting in question.

She said there is a "clear implication that this is in meat that people eat, enough to kill turkeys. If the drug is showing up in our food, it's not supposed to be. We can't understand what's going on without more information."

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