



Pet Owners Ask: What's in Fido's Food, Anyway?

A Massive Pet Food Recall Has Spurred U.S. Consumer Groups and Pet Owners to Call for More Oversight

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LOS ANGELES, April 8, 2007 — Wheat gluten? The contaminated ingredient that was traced to the massive pet food recall is prompting a new wave of scrutiny of the industry. The big question pet owners, consumer groups, animal rights activists, legislators, and others want to know is: "What's in this stuff, anyway?"

Other questions on their minds run the gamut from who polices the pet-food chain, to who writes the standards for pet-food labeling, to which companies are making which brands with what ingredients.

To the relief of pet food companies, at least, that last question has been answered in the case of the recalled 60 million pet food containers. The U.S. Food and Drug Administration has confirmed that a Chinese company was the source of contaminated wheat gluten that made its way into the dog and cat food sold under nearly 100 labels across North America.

Spurred by reports of pet sicknesses and deaths, thousands of pet owners are now joining calls for increased industry self-regulation and government oversight.

"The pet food industry has been unquestioned for a long time. But now in light of what's happened people are finding out what is actually in the pet food they buy and becoming really concerned," says Kate Morris, publisher of bowzer.biz, an online magazine for dog owners. "Consumers are beginning to raise ... questions about whether companies and the government do enough testing to ensure the safety of products."

Others are taking matters into their own hands, seeking alternative methods of pet feeding such as home cooking, or buying more elite, more expensive and better-trusted brands.

"One of the positive fallouts from this is that pet owners are becoming more educated about where their pet foods are made, what's in them and what to look for," says Alan Kerzner, CEO of Halo, a holistic natural pet-care line. "More and more pet owners are demanding quality, finding out they are willing to pay extra prices for premium foods. In a kind of perverse way, the opportunities for these companies have grown over the past month."

Veterinarians and animal hospitals across the nation report high anxiety among pet owners, with calls and walk-ins on the rise, often over inconsequential or nonexistent health problems. Many have initiated or joined lawsuits to seek damages or reparations from several companies whose tainted food has led to at least 15 animal deaths — but which, many observers say, could be thousands more.

The FDA announced April 3 that more pet foods could be recalled in coming days as investigators track worldwide distribution of the contaminated wheat gluten used in pet food. Wheat gluten is a source of protein. Officials said they had discovered melamine — a chemical used in plastics, glue, and fertilizers — in test samples of the recalled wet food and some dry treats. Groups such as People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA) and the Humane Society of the United States (HSUS) say more information is needed about other possible contaminants.

"There are lots of unanswered questions that need to be answered more frankly," says Andrew Rowan, HSUS executive vice president for operations. "We would certainly like to know what has actually happened."

PETA has asked FDA head Andrew von Eschenbach to resign for allegedly refusing to name the maker of a dry pet food believed to include a contaminant.

U.S. lawmakers are also questioning the FDA about its handling of the current case, as well as its oversight in general.

"Reports that kept food manufacturing facilities are not being inspected by the FDA are very disconcerting," states a letter from Rep. Rosa DeLauro, D-Conn., and Sen. Richard Durbin, D-Ill., to Eschenbach. The letter asks how many FDA inspections take place at pet-food processing facilities and asks what changes in current laws and funding would spur better performance. "Many cats dogs and other pets are considered members of the household, and it is unfortunate that not even the family pet is immune from the food safety problems that are plaguing our nation."

For its part, the FDA says the recall event "is in its final stages" but that it is still too early to say what lessons have been learned and what exactly needs to be addressed to keep such events from happening again.

"We are just tying up investigations now & we don't see where the system didn't work & it doesn't appear from what we've seen that anyone can be blamed in this country," says Julie Zawisza, spokeswoman for the FDA. She says the agency does not see where more regulation would help. "The difference in this situation compared to the contaminants recently found on spinach is that something [tainted] came in from abroad," she says. "I'm not sure there is a system that will pick up every single thing."

The overall concern goes beyond calls for formal reform, lawsuits, and fear, several observers say. Government is already overstretched and underfunded in policing the human food chain let alone food for pets, many say.

"I'm not sure that realistically there will be much change after this. Government agencies are generally understaffed already with much to oversee in the human food chain," says Sonia Waisman, adjunct professor in animal law at Loyola Law School of Los Angeles.