

Neglect or criminal intent?

THE NUMBER OF BLACKMAILING ACTIONS BY PEOPLE THREATENING TO CONTAMINATE PRODUCTS IN THE SUPERMARKETS IS ON THE INCREASE



+ Bread packs are easy to manipulate by criminal minds. Added to that is the fact that the technical methods for detecting foreign matters in food are far from being perfect. A couple in Germany was sent to jail for several years because it tried for two years to blackmail Nestle by contaminating the Group's products with foreign substances. An 18-year old tried a similar way to blackmail the international trading group Metro. Supermarket chains and food producers do not like to discuss these and other cases in public. The consumer's trust in their products could be impaired resulting in a reduction in sales figures.

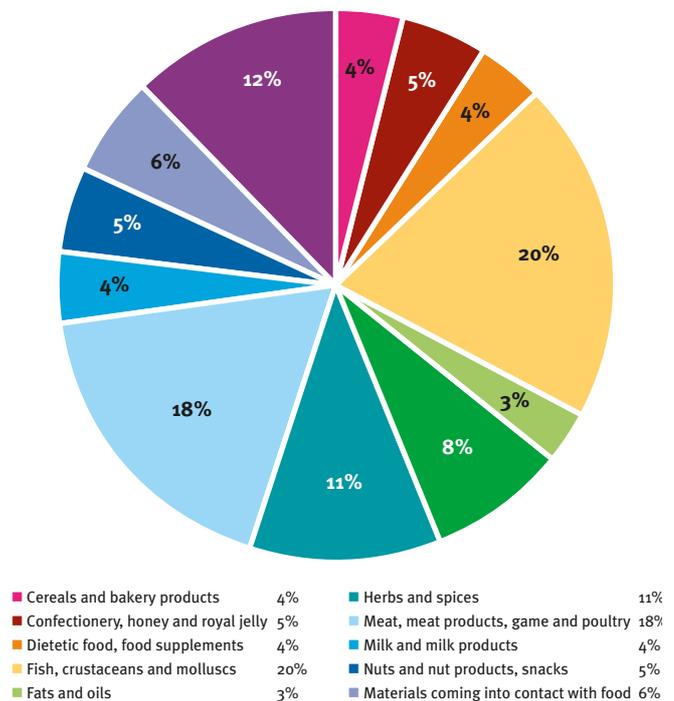
Criminal methods however, are not the only reasons for the presence of foreign bodies in consumer packs, as even the most advanced detectors are not able to find all product contamination. X-ray scanners for example do not trigger an alarm if thin glass from fluorescent tubes, wooden splinters or porous plastic is contained in the bread which passes through the detector. (see boxed item)

Cereals and baked products belong to the most contaminated products, according to EU statistics. The European Union collects and publishes information on suspicious food within its so-called Rapid Alert System for Feed and Food. In 1999, 698 cases were registered with this system. In 2005 the number rose to 6897 with 3158 being notifications and 3739 being additional information notifications, mostly as follow-up to earlier notifications.

30% of the 3158 notifications were alert notifications and 70% were information notifications. The latter ones are usually information regarding too high a level of undesired substances or illegal GMO raw materials in food and feed products from the US.

++ Foreign matter detection in a company is rather common procedure. But what is next? By simply sealing the bag's ends, the clip closure becomes a barrier impeding a possible contamination after production.

61% of the alert notifications were issued for products from EU member states, 3% came from the candidate states while 36% of the alerts were concerning products from third world countries. Three quarters of all information notifications were issued for products from third world countries. The alert notifications 2005 according to product category revealed the following distribution:



Source: The Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed (RASFF) Annual Report 2005

X-ray scanner

Sensitivity: Examples of contaminations recognized by x-ray scanner (list not complete):

- + metal
- + non-ferrous metal in foil, including stainless steel
- + glass
- + stones, gravel
- + bones (under certain circumstances)
- + PVC
- + TFE (teflon)
- + ceramics or cement
- + agglomerations
- + missing products

Limitations: X-ray scanners cannot detect the following foreign matters in most food

Examples of contaminations recognized by x-ray scanner (list not complete):

- + porous plastics
- + thin glass (e.g. from fluorescent tubes)
- + insects
- + wood
- + hair
- + cardboard
- + paper +++

Source: www.loma.com

Considering the notifications in 2005 (figures for 2006 are not yet available) it shows that foreign bodies are mostly found in fruit and vegetables and feed followed by cereals and bakery products. Since HACCP, IFS and BRC became reality for food producing companies, metal detectors are obligatory and an increasing number of food companies have also invested in x-ray scanners in order to detect and remove contaminations such as glass, stone or metal.

However this is all futile when the product has already reached the dispatch department or the store shelves. If an unhappy employee or a criminal then puts foreign objects into a pack for revenge or blackmail, there is no way to detect these before the pack is sold. A large industrial bakery in Great-Britain had to keep recalling for a prolonged time products, as consumers were finding needles, glass splinters or similar foreign matters in the packed products which had been placed there after the end of the production process by an employee who was trying to take revenge. Commonly used clip closures at many bread packages are a real invitation to such criminals. It cannot be detected whether the pack has been opened and reclosed again. However, there is a solution. In the US for example, increasingly, packages can be found whose closures have been secured by a seal. If the seal is not intact, the supermarket's personnel responsible for the products on the bread shelves can easily recognize a possible manipulation and sort the product in question out. +++

Hazard category	Confectionery, honey and royal jelly	Meat (other than poultry)	Poultry meat	Milk products	Fish	Crustaceans	Molluscs	Fats and oils	Soups, broths and sauces	Nut products and snacks	Fruit and vegetables	Herbs and spices	Cereals and bakery products	Dietetic foods, food supplements	Animal nutrition	Food contact materials	Other
(Potentially) Pathogenic micro-organisms	1	138	83	39	59	22	44	1		3	38	78	3	4	49		19
Adverse effect / allergic reaction	1	1		1						1			3	1	2		4
Bad or insufficient controls		4	5		6	1		4					1				2
Biocontaminants (other)					22												
Biotoxins (other)		1				5	9										
Chemical contamination (other)		3			1					1	1		1	4		4	1
Composition		5	1		61	1		46	26		35	131	9	13	6	2	6
Feed additives			3														
Food additives	38	3		2	2	66		6	4	1	55	19	21				13
Foreign bodies	5	3		2	1		1		2	6	19	5	9	1	17		5
GMO / novel food											3			5	1		
Heavy metals	4	2			51	20	20		2	2	15	2		13	4	63	
Industrial contaminants (other)					5			5	10		1				4		
Labelling absent / incomplete / incorrect	1			1										2			1
Microbiological contamination	1	6		11	19	5	22		1	4	14	16	4	3			5
Migration																118	
Mycotoxins				1		1		1	1	827	81	57	9	2	2		7
Not determined / other	6	32	13	1	1			1				1	1		1	3	7
Organoleptic aspects		4	2			1	1		1	5	6	4	1			5	1
Packaging defective / incorrect		6			4				1		1			1		1	2
Parasitic infestation		2			20												
Pesticide residues	3							1			64	4					
Radiation		1			1	1			1		4	4		8			12
Residues of veterinary medicinal products	55	4	3	1	62	42											

Source: The Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed (RASFF) Annual Report 2005