

EU audits investigate Egypt and India's aflatoxin problem

By Joe Whitworth on September 29, 2023

The European Commission's health and safety unit has published findings from two assessments looking at controls on aflatoxins in nuts in Egypt and India.

A DG Sante audit in Egypt in September 2022 was due to continuing Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed (RASFF) notifications for aflatoxins in peanuts. There were 41 in 2021 and at least 34 in 2022. A few operators are behind the majority of rejections, said auditors. Local officials said the rise in alerts was related to increased exports.

Each consignment of peanuts originating in or coming from Egypt must be accompanied by a health certificate and results of official sampling and analysis verifying compliance with EU

aflatoxin limits. Imports are also subject to checks at a frequency of 30 percent.

The National Food Safety Authority (NFSA) said a law for approving packing houses for export should be applied during the 2023 season. Guides had been created or were being prepared to promote ways to prevent and reduce the formation of aflatoxins in peanuts.

The Central Administration for Plant Quarantine (CAPQ) is responsible for phytosanitary and traceability controls at the farm level. The agency told the audit team that from the 2023 growing season, peanut farmers will be included in the control system.

At the time of the audit, there were no inspections at peanut farms, but they were intended to take place from 2023. Not all suppliers were registered, and the number of inspections by NFSA was small. The audit team found most packing houses visited didn't comply with EU requirements and with some relevant national rules.

Enforcement issues

Monitoring of over 500 samples collected at packing houses, warehouses, wholesalers, and supermarkets in 2021/2022 showed a high percentage of rejections due to aflatoxin.

Based on visits to four packing houses, all involved in recent RASFF notifications, auditors found good progress in structural and hygienic conditions since NFSA inspections began. However, there was a lack of control over suppliers – such as no sampling of incoming peanuts; poor floor, wall, and window maintenance, and some had only just started to develop HACCP plans.

Auditors said the fact that the official certificate for export is issued for operators who do not comply with all requirements “significantly weakens” the reliability of the certification process. The export of processed peanuts also does not comply with EU requirements, as no samples are taken from consignments, and no official certificates are issued. Egyptian officials said they would ensure official certificates will be issued before shipments leave the country from the 2023 season.

One packing house was involved in 45 RASFF notifications, while another was mentioned 15 times. NFSA said in some cases, there are significant delays between the arrival of consignments at the EU port and the date samples are taken. This could lead to the development of aflatoxin if storage conditions were not good. Although some packing houses

have been involved in many cases in the same year, local officials did not provide evidence that measures were taken against them.

Inspection reports were detailed but did not include a conclusion on the root cause of the problem. Reports included many severe non-conformities, but this did not prevent operators from exporting, provided results from sampling complied with maximum aflatoxin levels.

Indian findings

The audit in India in March 2023 was also prompted by RASFF notifications due to aflatoxins. There were 39 notices in 2022. This could be due to more sampling of consignments at EU ports, but, like Egypt, a few operators accounted for most rejections. Shipments of peanuts originating in or consigned from India are subject to similar rules as those from Egypt, but checks are at a higher rate of 50 percent.

Registration is not compulsory for peanut farmers. Companies must be registered to export to the EU, but shelling or sorting operations not exporting directly don't need to be registered.

DG Sante said that official controls at primary producers are not designed to verify and monitor if, and to what extent they implement good agricultural practices to prevent the formation of aflatoxins or compliance with EU requirements.

Auditors found controls after registration are not carried out as planned, and there is no risk assessment to establish the frequency of inspections or to focus on high-risk peanut units.

A review of inspection reports revealed no written evidence that HACCP plans are verified, that measures are in place to mitigate the level of aflatoxins in peanuts, or that factors that would influence conditions for mold growth and aflatoxin production have been assessed.

The audit team reviewed the HACCP plan of a business and noted discrepancies between what was done in practice and what was in the document. They also found many lots were rejected due to high levels of aflatoxin on reception.

Auditors focused on 29 RASFF notifications involving two peanut units in 2022.

Correspondence with the food business had taken place; however, a root cause analysis had not been done to help solve the underlying problem.

One establishment was suspended for one month, and the other for four months. After COVID-19 pandemic restrictions were partially lifted, physical visits were carried out, and despite non-compliance being found, the suspension was revoked. Two labs involved in sampling and analysis were also suspended.

RASFF notifications took place when many problems in shipping consignments were encountered due to the pandemic. Information given to the audit team showed up to 90 days between pre-export testing in India and analysis at the EU lab. This means aflatoxin levels may have increased during the long storage and transportation periods.

