

Kenya

grapples with maize contamination

by Shem Oirere, Freelance journalist

The level of aflatoxin in maize, produced or imported and stored in East Africa, continues to be a cause for concern among the region's consumers and millers, on the back of a weak regulatory framework and uncoordinated approach in tackling the contamination.

Kenya has become the latest country to report new incidents of aflatoxin contamination of maize imported recently, to tackle a famine crisis triggered by prolonged drought in early 2017.

The quality of stored cereals in the country has dominated headlines for several months now, as millers and other stakeholders discussed the safety of the maize imported during a four-month duty free import window, that millers were allowed to ramp up their stocks to mitigate effects of the 2017 drought.

Government agencies, led by the Kenya Bureau of Standards (KEBS), which prepares standards relating to products, measurements, materials and processes, in addition to promoting them at national, regional and international levels, were called into action after thousands of 90kg bags of maize, among the 44 million that had been imported between May and September of 2017, were later found to be discolored.

A large share of the maize imports came from Uganda, Ethiopia, Zambia, Ukraine, Russia and Mexico, and were sold to the National Cereals and Produce Board (NCPB), a state-owned firm that promotes commercial trading in grains in Kenya.

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"The sampling of the maize was done as per the relevant sampling standard, EAS 900:2017, as agreed in advance in a meeting with the National Cereals and Produce Board," said Phoebe Gituku, KEBS spokesperson.

Other state agencies involved in the testing the quality of the maize at the NCPB depots include the Kenya Plant Health Inspectorate Service, Kenya Agricultural & Livestock Research Organisation and the NCPB itself.

Although the report and recommendations by KEBS have been submitted to the Senate for debate and action, the NCPB has insisted on more tests on the maize samples, to re-confirm the findings before a decision is taken on next course of action, after separate investigations showed the maize was good for human consumption.

“We had two tests done by other organisations and they told us the maize was good for consumption,” said Albin Sang, Acting NCPB Managing Director.

Despite the NCPD position on the matter, Ms Gituku insists “KEBS stands by the report presented to the Senate on white maize quality and NCPB depots countrywide.” The tests were carried out based on parameters of moisture content, browning and presence of foreign matter.

“KEBS boasts of state-of-the-art modern testing equipment and highly qualified and competent personnel,” added Ms Gituku.

The difference in opinion between KEBS and NCPB, both government agencies, is symptomatic of existing challenges in streamlining food safety tests, not only in Kenya, but in East Africa.

Last August, a forum on aflatoxin prevention and control, organised in Nairobi by the East African Community (EAC), a regional intergovernmental organisation of six partner states of Kenya, Burundi, Uganda, South Sudan, Tanzania and Rwanda, in partnership with USAID and the International Institute for Tropical Agriculture, was told most of these countries operate a food safety regulatory system, that is based on the multiple agencies model.

“Under this multiple agencies system, the food safety regulatory responsibilities are shared between government ministries/agencies, such as health, trade and industry, tourism, livestock and agriculture, which leaves overlapping mandates, and often conflicts among these agencies,” said a policy brief released at the Nairobi forum.

“This greatly hampers the food control activity, due to poor inter-agency coordination, inadequately accessible testing

technology, weak inspection capacities, lack of clarity on roles and responsibilities of food regulatory bodies and inadequate human and technical resources,” said the policy brief.

For Kenya, the reported presence of aflatoxins in the recently imported maize is the latest in a series of such contamination of maize, since 1981.

The 2004 maize contamination was the worst in this country of more than 50 million people, after it killed more than 125 people after they ate the cereal with *Aspergillus flavus*, the major producer of aflatoxin.

Even as Kenya’s Senate continues to prepare a report on the aflatoxin contamination of the millions of bags of maize in the NCPB silos across the East African country, it emerged at the August forum in Nairobi that up to 60 percent of aflatoxin contamination in food has been reported in many parts of the East African region.

“The EAC region has a weak system of enforcing the adopted standards for aflatoxin control, due to poor inter-agency coordination, lack of accessible testing technology, weak inspection capacities, and lack of clarity on roles and responsibilities of food regulatory bodies,” said the brief.

Maize farming in Kenya has been characterised by erratic production volumes and increasing importation, that has multiplied eight times, between 2013 and 2017, to more than 1.3 million tonnes. Maize production had reduced from 3.4 million tonnes to 3.2 million, by the end of 2016, largely because of persistent drought and weak government policy.

The reduction forced the government to allow importation of 1.7 million metric tonnes in 2017, some suspected to have been of poor quality.