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Tests Expose Presence of Banned Steroid in Mexican Meat-Production Cycle

by Carlos Navarro

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Mexican livestock producers appear to be using the human growth hormone (HGH) clenbuterol in meat production, a practice that has landed the Mexican soccer federation in hot water with international soccer authorities. The issue first emerged in the summer of this year, when the Mexican national soccer team was forced to suspend five players from the team during the Gold Cup tournament in the US after they tested positive for clenbuterol, which is banned in international competition. Authorities later determined that the clenbuterol, an anabolic steroid that enhances body mass, entered the bodies of the five players from meat they had consumed, and the players were not sanctioned further.

The issue emerged again in the World Cup for players under age 17, which Mexico hosted in July. The international soccer federation (Fédération Internationale de Football Association, FIFA), which conducted random tests for controlled substances among the players from the 24 teams, found traces of clenbuterol in the bodies of 109 athletes tested. FIFA medical examiners later determined that those players had consumed contaminated meat.

FIFA medical officer Jiri Dvorak described the results as "highly surprising." But FIFA and the World Anti-Doping Agency (WADA) absolved the players of any intent to enhance their bodies through HGHs. "It is not a problem of doping but a problem of public health," Dvorak told reporters, adding that none of the players was harmed or put in any danger.

"It's extremely serious for WADA," Olivier Niggli, the anti-doping watchdog's legal director, said in a conference call. "Now it's known it's an issue, warnings are going to be sent."

The concerns extended to other international competitions in Mexico this fall. Athletes participating in the Pan American Games in Guadalajara in October were advised to eat only in designated cafeterias.

Mexican health official asks for proof

The negative publicity surrounding the presence of clenbuterol in the soccer players who were tested has put some Mexican officials on the defensive. Mikel Arriola, commissioner of the Protección de Riesgos Sanitarios (COFEPRIS), said the release of the tests from FIFA and WADA following the Under-17 World Cup prompted his agency to conduct extensive tests of slaughterhouses around the country. "Since that date, we have visited 47 slaughterhouses in seven states of the country and found traces of clenbuterol in nine of them, which we closed for sanitary reasons," said Arriola.

Still, Arriola contends that FIFA has not provided evidence that Mexican meat was behind the high number of athletes testing positive for clenbuterol at the Under-17 World Cup. "FIFA has not provided any evidence, and we do not have reports of people being hospitalized during the soccer

tournament. FIFA should say what they used for evidence," said the COFEPRIS commissioner. "The symptoms of clenbuterol poisoning are very intense. We can say that it would be very difficult to play a game of soccer while being infected by this substance."

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But FIFA said it obtained plenty of evidence. "Samples of meat were collected from several hotels where the teams that participated in the Under-17 World Cup stayed," said a FIFA spokesperson. "The samples were tested at a laboratory in Germany."

Systemic problem

Critics point out that the problem is systemic and that there are deficiencies in some stages of the inspection chain. For example, COFEPRIS places a high emphasis on inspecting slaughterhouses and livestock-processing facilities, but monitoring is uneven at best at facilities where livestock are raised.

Luis de la Calle, who once served as deputy economy secretary, said the problem lies in a system that promotes dual standards. For example, some of the larger private operations opt to submit to the Tipo Inspección Federal (TIF) system, which relies on strict norms and vigilance by COFEPRIS and the Secretaría de Agricultura, Ganadería, Desarrollo Rural, Pesca y Alimentación (SAGARPA). Then there are local and municipal operations that seldom submit to strict inspections. "Instead of addressing this situation in a comprehensive manner, authorities have chosen to maintain the dual system, in which the quality of some meat is ensured while other product escapes obligatory inspection," said de la Calle, who is chief executive of the company De la Calle, Madrazo, Mancera, S.C. (CMM).

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Some experts believe that Mexico should implement international norms, such as ISO 22000, which certify the quality and healthfulness of meat throughout the productive chain. The certification mechanism was developed six years ago. "ISO 22000 is a voluntary norm throughout the world, but in some countries meat-producing companies are obligated to provide certification under other means," said Juan Carlos Gómez, marketing director at Sai Global México, a company that consults on certification and health quality.

The livestock industry acknowledges that increased demand for meat and poultry has led producers to increase reliance on synthetic materials. "The population growth and the increased purchasing power of Mexicans has increased demand for our products, which has led us to seek help from the pharmaceutical industry," said Vicente Gómez, director of the livestock sector at the Consejo Nacional Agropecuario (CNA).

Livestock ranchers are focusing on efforts to reduce disease among their animals and boost production of meat, milk, and eggs. Because of this, the demand for pharmaceuticals such as cloramphenicol, diethylstilbestrol, vancomycin, and clenbuterol has increased by 6% in recent years, said Vicente Gómez.

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