

# Pet food probe: Who was watching suppliers?

By [Julie Schmit](#), USA TODAY Updated 5/10/2007

Even some pet-food companies say they don't always know what's really in the food they sell. Or where the ingredients come from.

If you long suspected pet food contained mystery meat, this won't surprise you. But for a \$15 billion industry whose profits depend on consumers' trust, the admission may be the biggest revelation of all from the 8-week-old pet-food recall.

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Tuesday, federal officials said the contaminated pet-food ingredient from China that sickened dogs and cats nationwide was actually wheat flour — not wheat gluten or rice protein concentrate. That had escaped the pet-food makers who thought they bought wheat gluten or rice protein concentrate.

Five pet-food companies also recently said the company that made food for them added rice protein concentrate without their knowledge or consent. That came to light, the pet-food companies say, because the foods had to be recalled after the contamination was discovered.

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The Food and Drug Administration speculates that the wheat flour was deliberately spiked with melamine to make it look more protein-rich, thus more valuable, than it was. China has admitted two companies exported melamine-tainted product. The FDA also suspects that melamine and melamine compounds in the flour are creating a toxic brew that causes pets' kidneys to fail.

While some pet-food companies claim that they were victims of fraud, the case also illuminates weaknesses in U.S. pet-food-manufacturing oversight that companies are now trying to correct. One is that companies who market pet foods often don't make them and may not watch their contract manufacturers closely enough. The situations also raise questions about how diligent companies have been in selecting and inspecting suppliers of raw ingredients.

"The industry got lax and is ratcheting up the due diligence," says Greg Aldrich, consultant at Pet Food & Ingredient Technology. "None of them want to be caught in something like this again."

The recalls' scope has been vast. More than 5,800 products have been recalled. The FDA has received unconfirmed reports of 4,150 cat and dog deaths since Menu Foods announced the first recalls March 16. The company faces more than 50 lawsuits from pet owners.

Brands at all prices have been affected, from Wal-Mart's lower-priced Ol' Roy to premium foods made by Natural Balance Pet Foods. That company was co-founded by *Eight Is Enough* actor Dick Van Patten, who has eaten the food at trade shows to show off its quality.

"The entire industry is bloodied," says Mark Witriol, co-owner of Pet Food Express, which has 31 San Francisco-area locations. "Consumer trust is completely broken."

The recall has also relentlessly mowed down companies which at first thought they were safe. One is the high-end Blue Buffalo, which calls customers "pet parents" and sells some cans for almost \$2 a pop.

A week after the first recalls, when contaminated wheat gluten was the suspect, Blue Buffalo ran a full-page newspaper ad touting the healthfulness of its products and pointing out — in large type — that they didn't include wheat gluten. "You love them like family. So feed them like family," the ad said.

Since then, the 4-year-old Blue Buffalo has recalled or pulled a third of its product line.

Its first recall on April 19 was a dry cat food, whose recipe called for rice protein concentrate. At the time of the recall, the food was thought to have been made with contaminated rice protein concentrate from China. The FDA has now identified that as contaminated wheat flour.

Blue Buffalo said then that it didn't know that the concentrate came from China. That's not surprising: C.J. Foods, which made the cat food for Blue Buffalo, didn't know either, says C.J. Vice President Jerry Krueger.

C.J. got the ingredient from a U.S. supplier. It was imported by San Francisco-based Wilbur-Ellis.

As part of a post-9/11 measure to protect the food supply, federal law requires food companies to be able to trace products one step forward and one step back. For C.J., that meant to the U.S. supplier it won't identify and to Blue Buffalo.

While that has long been industry practice, the recall is likely to compel pet-food makers to know more about companies throughout the supply chain, says Sanford Goodman, CEO of M.I. Industries, owner of the Nature's Variety brand. Its products haven't been involved in the recall.

"The industry is now changed. ... It's incumbent for each of us to follow these ingredients back to the source," Goodman says.

### **A critical ingredient**

Blue Buffalo's second recall began April 27 after the FDA traced what it thought was contaminated rice protein concentrate from Wilbur-Ellis to several pet-food makers, including American Nutrition.

Like Menu Foods, American Nutrition makes canned dog and cat food for others. Such contract manufacturing is common in the industry because it's often cheaper for companies than operating plants themselves. Small companies, such as Blue Buffalo, and large companies, such as Wal-Mart, use contract manufacturers.

Both American Nutrition and Menu typically follow recipes their customers provide. They may also work with pet-food sellers to develop recipes. Either way, the ingredient list is supposed to reflect what's in the food. If it calls for brown rice, "that is what goes in, not cracked brown rice or anything else," says Goodman. If ingredients change, labeling changes, he says.

Blue Buffalo says on its website that American Nutrition "deliberately deceived" it by adding what was then thought to be rice protein concentrate to some of its products, even though the recipes didn't call for it. "What we say is in the can has got to be in the can," says Bill Bishop, Blue Buffalo president.

The American Nutrition recall also swept up some canned products from Mulligan Stew Pet Food, Canine Caviar Pet Foods, Diamond Pet Foods, Natural Balance and Costco's Kirkland Signature brand.

None say their recipes contained rice protein concentrate, and none say they were notified of the ingredient's addition by American Nutrition before the recall.

Mulligan says in a posting on its website that American Nutrition "tampered with our company's intellectual property" — its pet-food formula. Diamond and Natural Balance, in press releases, said American engaged in a "manufacturing

deviation." While Costco hasn't accused American Nutrition of wrongdoing, its formula called for "rice flour," says Craig Wilson, assistant vice president of food safety.

American Nutrition, in an e-mail response to questions from USA TODAY, said it's checking what it told the companies. The FDA had no comment, except to say that it was investigating.

Based on American Nutrition's comments, it didn't appear to know that the rice protein concentrate was actually wheat flour.

Before the FDA said that Tuesday, American Nutrition said in a statement it didn't do anything deceitful by using the rice protein ingredient. It said the pet-food formulas, per the customers' requests, were "rice-based" and so it selected rice protein as a "fortification source" from the "same family."

Still, the pet-food labels — what consumers look at — should have listed rice protein concentrate, says Eric Nelson, president of the American Association of Feed Control Officials, which defines ingredients.

By spiking the wheat flour with melamine, the flour would appear to contain more nitrogen. That's what pet-food companies look for when they test for protein content.

While wheat flour, wheat gluten and rice protein concentrate are all powders, wheat flour is usually whiter, says consultant Aldrich, but the difference may not be apparent to a factory worker.

Other routine raw-ingredient tests wouldn't identify wheat flour, he says. "It's easy to see how it got missed ... because no one was looking for it," says Aldrich. "Should they have been suspicious of their suppliers? Probably."

### **Improving oversight**

There's no consistency in how well pet-food sellers supervise their co-packers. "Some do extensive audits. Some don't," Aldrich says. Costco audited American Nutrition for good manufacturing practices, which govern things from cleanliness to record keeping, and found it to be a good operator.

Since the recall, Wal-Mart has begun setting up an audit process for its pet-food makers, says spokeswoman Karen Burke.

Blue Buffalo says it sometimes has an employee in plants when its product is being made. The smaller Canine Caviar does not.

Blue Buffalo has terminated its contract with American Nutrition, saying it no longer trusts the company. Canine Caviar is considering dropping its canned-food line because it lacks confidence in American Nutrition and Menu, and there are few other options, says President Jeff Baker.

Other pet-food sellers are stepping up their oversight of:

- Raw-ingredient sourcing.** Royal Canin USA has vowed not to use vegetable proteins, which include wheat gluten and rice protein concentrate, from China.

C.J. Foods said in a press release that it will not use protein sources from "exotic locations." Wal-Mart has asked its pet-food makers to find ways to improve raw-ingredient sourcing, says Burke.

- Manufacturing oversight.** Iams has a new policy forbidding its suppliers, including Menu Foods, from switching suppliers of raw ingredients unless Iams has checked out that supplier and OK'd the switch. Natural Balance and Diamond are requesting production records, which include ingredients, from contract manufacturers.

•**Production.** The recall will push more pet-food companies to make their food rather than contract it out, says Tim Phillips, editor of *Petfood Industry* magazine.

One company is already heading in that direction. Natura Pet Products, owner of the Innova and Evo brands, has vowed to buy or build a canning facility to make its own wet foods, even though none of its products have been recalled.

"At the end of the day, if anybody is going to screw something up, we want it to be us," says Natura co-founder Peter Atkins.