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**Original Scientific Paper**

## **FOOD FRAUD – AN OVERVIEW OF INCIDENTS REPORTED TO ALERT AND COOPERATION NETWORK AND THE EU RAPID ALERT SYSTEM FOR FOOD AND FEED**

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**Abstract.** *Food fraud leads to economic gain for fraudsters and harm for consumers. In addition, food fraud represents a disregard and violation of food regulations, and many frauds can affect consumer health by causing various illnesses or, in extreme cases, death. The aim of this paper is to analyze reported fraud cases in the EU's Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed (RASFF), or Alert and Cooperation Network (ACN). This paper presents an overview of the most common food fraud in Europe. During the review, data published in the public database of RASFF, i.e. Alert and Cooperation Network (ACN) in the period 2016-2023, were used. The number of requests from members of the ACN network regarding suspected fraud increased from 157 (2016) and 178 (2017) to 407 (2021), 600 (2022), and 758 (2023). In 2020, the largest number of requests were related to fats and oils, fish and fish products, and poultry meat and products. The situation was similar in 2021, with requirements related to red meat and products in third place. In 2022 and 2023, the largest number of requests were related to honey, livestock and red meat. According to RASFF, the most frequently reported food frauds in the observed period include: use of unauthorized ingredients, mislabeling, selling food after the expiration date, food not accompanied by proper documentation, food with incorrect or false import declarations, etc. Various analytical techniques are used to detect and prevent food fraud. They are mainly focused on targeted approaches for the identification of pre-selected analytes. The paper gives an overview of the most applied techniques. Although both detection methods and prevention measures related to food fraud problems have been implemented in various food supply chains, such situations continue to be reported worldwide. Competent authorities must identify (and sanction if necessary), and food business operators must mitigate and prevent food fraud.*

**Key words:** *Food fraud, ACN, RASFF, European Union*

### **Introduction**

Food fraud is the intentional misrepresentation of the identity or contents of a food product or food ingredient for the purpose of obtaining economic gain. Different organizations around the world have given several definitions of "Food fraud"[1]. The European Commission [2] defines food fraud as “any suspected intentional action by company or individuals with the aim of deceiving purchasers and gaining an undue advantage, in violation of the rules set out in article 1 paragraph 2 EU Regulation 2017/625.” This definition includes the following actions: dilution or substitution, hiding low quality ingredients, unauthorized improvement of quality characteristics, and violation of intellectual property rights during the manufacture of counterfeit

products, making false claims on packaging, or mislabeling, and illegal production of counterfeit goods.

Adulterated food products can have consequences for human health, ranging from mild to severe form, and they cause financial damage [3]. Preventing food fraud and reducing vulnerability to fraud are the first steps in the fight against food fraud and require repetitive efforts throughout the food supply chain [4].

Interpretation of RASFF data has been done by several researchers in recent years. Eissa et al. published several studies based on RASFF data [5, 6, 7] in which they analyzed notifications for different product categories or overviews of notifications in which the largest food contaminants with heavy metals were identified [8].

Tähkäpää and et.al. [9] analyzed data on the number of reported food frauds in Finland for the period 2008–2012. 92% of detected cases were reported through RASFF, of which in 33% of cases the reason for notification was illegal or unauthorized trade, practice or counterfeiting, while 67% of cases related to the detection of fraud or intent to commit fraud in documentation.

Branković [10] used RASFF data to monitor the presence of pesticide residues exported from Balkan countries to the EU.

In this paper, the authors presented data on food fraud cases recorded through official bodies of the European Union (The Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed (RASFF) and in the Alert and Cooperation Network' (ACN) system).

## **Material and Methods**

The data presented in this paper were collected based on official reports from the Alert and Cooperation Network (ACN) and The Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed (RASFF) for the period 2016-2024. During the research, the focus was on the product categories that were the subject of fraud and the hazard categories that were most commonly used in food fraud. In addition, attention was focused on notifications about food safety risks.

## **Results and discussion**

### **Regulations related to reducing the risk of food fraud**

In the past 10 years, new requirements have come into force in the European Union related to reducing the risk of food fraud, in particular requirements for hazard analysis and vulnerability assessment to food fraud [1]. They were partly prompted by two cases of food fraud, namely the adulteration of milk with melamine in China [11] and the addition of horsemeat to beef products in the EU [12]. This spurred legislators in the European Union (the European Commission and the governments of individual EU member states) to adopt new regulations to prevent similar events in the future. In addition, the European Commission has established a special unit, The Alert and Cooperation Network (ACN), which will, among other tasks, deal with the prevention of food fraud. This unit has a dual role: it functions as an **information service** [13] and distributes **Abstract of Monthly Reports** on Food Fraud [2]. The ACN network consists of two subunits: The Administrative Assistance and

Cooperation (AAC) and The Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed (RASFF). Within The Administrative Assistance and Cooperation there are 5 sub-units: General Non-compliance (AAC), Animal Welfare (AW), Plant Health (PH), Agri-Food Fraud (FF) and Pet Animals (PA).

RASFF facilitates the rapid exchange of information on direct or indirect risks to human health related to food or feed, and risks to human, animal or environmental health. The specified exchange is carried out through RASFF notifications. The Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed (RASFF) disseminates information about possible health risks in the supply chain issued by food safety authorities. Food fraud summary reports and RASFF system data are publicly available. The electronic system and RASFF enables the exchange of information between ACN members. Agri-Food Fraud (FFN) is used in cases where practices that may lead to fraud or potential fraud are identified. The above cases include noncompliances related to suspicion of intentional actions by companies or individuals for the purpose of misleading consumers and gaining economic advantage. Since the data is strictly confidential, the flow of information regarding these cases is restricted. Information is only available to food fraud contact persons.

Within the Joint Research Centre, the European Commission has established a laboratory unit (EC Joint Research Center) aimed at developing and validating methods for detecting food fraud [14]. The Official Controls Directive requires the establishment of a common European reference laboratory and national laboratories that function as partners of the common laboratory unit. A network has been established between EU member states for the exchange of information on potential incidents and analytical methods. Finally, due to the observed appropriate inspection and control of food business operators [1], rigorous implementation of the Food and Animal Feed Act [15], as well as regulations relating to animal health and welfare [16], plant health and application of plant protection products, is required.

A major contribution to preventing food counterfeiting is made by the regulations of other countries, as well as the requirements of the GFSI (Global Food Safety Initiative) and other organizations [17], Standards of identity [1], Geographical indication and related EU labeling schemes, etc.

Analytical fraud detection procedures are an important segment of the Food Fraud Mitigation Plan. Optimal analytical solutions work in the direction of reducing the risk of food fraud. To detect potential food fraud, laboratories use a wide range of analytical methods, ranging from simple tests to analyses using sophisticated instruments [18]. Of the large number of techniques available, only those that are more commonly used and give good results for the purpose of detecting and preventing food fraud will be listed here: chromatographic techniques (gas and liquid chromatography), stable isotope ratio analysis, vibrational spectroscopy (near infrared spectroscopy (NIR), mid-infrared spectroscopy (MIR), Fourier transform infrared (FTIR) spectrophotometry), nuclear magnetic resonance (NMR) spectroscopy, DNA-based methods (real-time PCR), immunological methods (enzyme-linked immunosorbent assay (ELISA) and other methods).

The choice of technique to be used in a specific case depends on the type of product and the form of fraud [19, 20, 21].

### **Data and tools to support food fraud vulnerability assessment**

Information relevant to the risk of food fraud can be obtained from various sources [1]. To support FFVA, GFSI recommended multiple data sources (for example, subscription-based databases, government and university websites, blogs and media publications, trade and research associations, industry and trade networks, information from food analysis laboratories, and risk classification measures by country and level of corruption, etc.) [22].

### **Data and tools to support hazard analysis and food fraud vulnerability assessment**

Agri-Food Fraud (FF) and the Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed (RASFF) issue regular reports on cases of fraud involving food produced in European Union countries and fraud involving food imported into the European Union from other countries. Monitoring the annual reports shows that the number of notifications issued is constantly increasing from 157 (2016) to 178 (2017), 234 (2018), 292 (2019), 349 (2020) [23], 576 (2022), 757 (2023) and 1335 (AAC) and 1959 (RASFF) (2024) [24]. During 2021, 4607 notifications were sent through RASFF, of which 2290 were notifications of noncompliances. Suspicions of fraud were forwarded through the network in 407 cases. Among the 4607 RASFF notifications sent in 2021, 4102 were related to food, 236 to feed and 269 to food contact materials [25]. In 2023, a total of 4695 RASFF notifications were sent, of which 4199 were related to food, 303 to feed and 193 to food contact materials. In 2023, 1263 notifications were related to food fraud [26]. The total number of notifications related to suspected fraud in 2023 was 758, which is an increase of 26.3% compared to 2022 [26]. In 2023, the largest number of frauds were related to the category of meat and meat products (except poultry)-46 reports (13.3% of the total number of food fraud notifications). The identified problems in the notifications were mostly related to substitution of ingredients, type and mislabeling. According to the number of notifications, the category "Live animals" is in second place (10.1%). As in previous years, applications were mostly related to horses. The suspicions of fraud related to smuggling and counterfeiting of documents (animal passport and health certificate). In third place in terms of number of notifications in 2023 were honey and royal jelly (9% of total notifications). The most common suspicions were related to the dilution of honey with sugar syrups. When it comes to the "Fats and oils" category, there is a visible increase compared to the previous year (8.7%). Most of the notifications are related to quality parameters or mislabelling (for example, lower quality olive oil was sold as extra virgin olive oil). In 2023, the largest number of notifications **classified as fraud** was related to counterfeiting/unauthorized alteration of product composition (40.4%). The largest number of notifications that were classified in the category " Substitution of species or ingredients" (59) was related to products of animal origin (honey, meat, poultry and fish products) [26].

Other notifications related to "Unapproved/undeclared treatment, process or product" (49) of different groups of goods (for example, dietetic foods, nutritional supplements and fortified foods). "Wrong description/wrong labeling" (23.8%) is the second most frequently reported fraud category. In this category, problems were most often related to quality, shelf life/production, and country of origin, nutritional /health claims. The "gray market" represented 18.3% of notifications issued in 2023. Several notifications were related to "Smuggling of live animals and plant protection products". "Document forgery" (9.5%) is the category in which fraud with documents related to live animals (animal passport, public health certificate, etc.) is most prevalent. In the category "Counterfeiting" (7.8%), the largest number of notifications related to goods with a geographical indication and geographical origin from the milk and milk products group.

Since 2024, the EU has been using new terminology and categorization of suspected fraud in the agri-food sector: product manipulation, record manipulation and other Noncompliances, which are described in more detail in subcategories in CEN [27]. The European Commission publishes **monthly reports** on suspected fraud in the agricultural and food sectors. These reports highlight cases of cross-border Noncompliances that have been identified and information about them as potential fraud has been shared within ACN. The reports cover the entire food supply chain (food, feed, food contact materials, farm animal welfare, plant protection products, veterinary drugs and other inputs whose residues or contaminants may be found in food and feed). By publishing these reports, the Commission supports Member States in carrying out risk-based controls and helps food businesses assess their vulnerability to the impact of fraudulent and misleading practices [24]. Compared to 2023, in 2024 the total number of ACN notifications increased by 8% (9460), while the number of notifications through RASFF increased by 12% (5250 notifications). 1335 (AAC) and 1959 (RASFF) notifications refer to potentially intentional conduct. Compared to 2023, this represents an increase of 24% (AAC) and 21% (RASFF) [24].

Notifications related to "Fruits and vegetables" account for 16% of the total number of ACN notifications for 2024 (1479). The largest number of cases (about 66%) refers to possible health risks. The product category "Cereals and bakery products" represents about 6% of all notifications (562) in ACN. Of those notifications, 70% refer to potential health risks. In 2024, about 4% of notifications (392) in the ACN were related to herbs and spices, of which 81% related to potential health risks. The category of fats and oils accounts for about 3% (265) of all notifications recorded in ACN. These notifications are related to several potential health risks (17%). Olive oil, and especially extra virgin olive oil, is one of the foods most susceptible to fraud in Europe (mixing of real oil with cheaper oils or use of lower quality olive oil, and misclassification of olive oil) [24].

In 2024, the category "Meat and meat products" accounts for 10% of notifications (932) recorded in the ACN [24]. Between 2018 and 2024, several horsemeat-related issues were reported to the ACN (a total of 96 suspected fraud and 74 cases of noncompliances without immediate health risks), while 30 RASFF notifications indicated potential health concerns. In 2024, the data indicate similar problems (15

noncompliances, 5 non-compliances and one RASFF notification). In 2024, notifications related to the category "Fish and fish products" represent around 4% of the total number of notifications (388) in the ACN. The majority of cases (64%) refer to possible health risks. In 2024, notifications related to "Milk and milk products" account for 3% (245) of the total number of notifications in the ACN. Of these, 51% refer to potential health risks in cases of microbiological contamination (eg *Listeria monocytogenes*, *Escherichia coli* (STEC), and a few cases of contamination with molds and yeasts). The notifications also indicate other types of Noncompliances and suspected fraud: traceability issues, incorrect documentation, misrepresentation of product origin, misuse of Protected Designations of Origin (PDO) and Protected Geographical Indications (PGI), and product manipulation: use of undeclared food additives (for example, ascorbic acid in cheese) or substitution (type of milk). The trade in honey and honey products in the EU is under strict control. Nevertheless, the number of ACN notices related to "Honey" is significant (52). The most common problems are related to honey manipulation-dilution with foreign sugars. In 2024, "Confectionery products" accounts for 3% (225) of ACN's notifications, with 51% of them including potential health risks [24]. Gummy candies were reported most often. In several cases, the presence of cannabinoids, for example tetrahydrocannabinol (THC) and cannabidiol (CBD), has been documented. A large number of cases relate to product labeling and quality: insufficient information about allergens, labeling of product claims (for example, "gluten-free" or health claims), and non-fulfillment of legal requirements.

Notifications related to "Dietary foods, food supplements and enriched foods" in 2024 accounted for 7% of all notifications (642) in the ACN, with 60% of them relating to potential health risks. It is important to note that almost 70% of reported cases are marked as potential fraud [24].

## Conclusion

There are different databases and fraud monitoring systems, and each of them uses its own methods for standardizing and summarizing data. Suspicions of fraud allow the European Commission to assess in detail possible links, trends and repetitions of notifications. When it is considered that further monitoring is necessary, the cases are submitted to the competent authorities for possible investigation.

The EU Rapid Alert System for Food and Feed (RASFF) is a public database that collects and generates notifications from the competent authorities of EU member states about non-compliance with food or feed law. The main role of RASFF is to collect reports on potentially hazardous contaminated food and feed entering the EU and to inform member states about this, so that such food can be quickly recalled and the risk to consumer health can be eliminated. An alert is issued only when a food poses a risk. However, it is important to note that RASFF prepares reports without any subsequent justification or action being taken. Balkan countries (Albania, North Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia and Bosnia and Herzegovina) are not members of the EU and RASFF, but actively use the RASFF Window. Information is sent in cases concerning the listed countries, or in cases of reporting food originating from or shipped from or to those countries. Because fraud is designed to remain undetected, it

is feared that many incidents of fraud are never detected. However, it is also likely that many fraud issues, which are discovered within the supply chain, when the counterfeit product has not yet reached the consumer, are resolved in business relationships and never communicated publicly. Therefore, secure information exchange systems are a critical step in preventing food fraud.

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## **PREVARE SA HRANOM – PREGLED INCIDENATA PRIJAVLJENIH U EU ALERT AND COOPERATION NETWORK I SISTEMU BRZOG UZBUNJIVANJA ZA HRANU I HRANU ZA ŽIVOTINJE**

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**Sažetak.** *Prevare sa hranom vode ka ekonomskoj dobiti za prevarante i šteti za kupce. Osim toga, prevare sa hranom predstavljaju nepoštovanje i kršenje propisa o hrani, a mnoge prevare mogu uticati na zdravlje potrošača uzrokujući različite bolesti ili u ekstremnim slučajevima smrt. Cilj ovog rada je analiza prijavljenih slučajeva prevara u EU Rapid alert system for food and feed (RASFF), odnosno Alert and Cooperation Network' (ACN). U ovom radu prikazane su prevare sa hranom koje se najčešće dešavaju u Evropi. Tokom pregleda korišteni su podaci koji su objavljeni u javnoj bazi podataka RASFF-a, odnosno Alert and Cooperation Network' (ACN) u periodu 2016-2023. Broj zahtjeva članica ACN mreže u vezi sa sumnjom na prevaru povećao se sa 157 (2016) i 178 (2017) na 407 (2021), 600 (2022), odnosno 758 (2023). U 2020. godini najveći broj zahtjeva odnosio se na masti i ulja, ribu i proizvode od ribe, te živinsko meso i proizvode. Slična situacija je bila i 2021. godine, s tim da su na trećem mjestu bili zahtjevi u vezi sa crvenim mesom i proizvodima od mesa. 2022. i 2023. godine najveći broj zahtjeva se odnosio na med, živu stoku i crveno meso. Prema RASFF-u, u prevare sa hranom koje su najčešće prijavljene u posmatranom periodu spadaju: upotreba nedozvoljenih sastojaka, pogrešno označavanje, prodaje hrane poslije roka upotrebe, hrana koju nije pratila ispravna dokumentacija, hrana sa nepravilnim ili lažnim uvoznim deklaracijama itd. U svrhu otkrivanja i sprečavanja prevara sa hranom primjenjuju se različite analitičke tehnike. One su, uglavnom, fokusirane na ciljane pristupe radi identifikacije prethodno odabranih analita. U radu je dat pregled najviše primjenjivanih tehnika. Iako su i metode otkrivanja i mjere prevencije u vezi sa problemima prevare u hrani implementirane u različitim lancima snabdijevanja hranom, takvi se događaji i dalje prijavljuju širom svijeta. Nadležni organi moraju identifikovati (i po potrebi sankcionisati), a subjekti u poslovanju sa hranom ublažiti i spriječiti pojavu prevara sa hranom.*

**Ključne riječi:** *Prevare sa hranom, ACN, RASFF, Evropska unija*

