

Tightening up quality control on foreign cheeses

The Dutch cheese sector, in cooperation with the Netherlands Food and Consumer Product Safety Authority (NVWA), has developed a protocol specifically aimed at risk management of Listeria monocytogenes in foreign cheeses and varieties of cheese.

European Regulation 2073/2005 requires that the producer demonstrate that Listeria monocytogenes cannot grow > 100 cfu/g at the end of the shelf life.

Given the physicochemical properties of a number of foreign cheeses, Listeria monocytogenes could possibly grow in these varieties. The NVWA regards Listeria monocytogenes as a significant food safety risk and its supervision is extremely strict (described in greater detail in information sheet 85*). In practice, this would imply that the shelf life of foreign cheeses after cutting and packaging would be extremely short (about five days). A Listeria monocytogenes analysis and positive release would also have to take place within this five-day period. As a result, many foreign cheeses would no longer be commercially available.

The Dutch processors and packers of foreign cheeses – united in the branch organisation for the dairy trade: Gemzu – have therefore drawn up a Safety Assurance Regime (SAR) together with the NVWA and the Netherlands Controlling Authority for Milk and Milk Products (COKZ). This protocol is specific to the cutting and packaging of (foreign) cheeses, is formally recognised by the Dutch food safety authorities (COKZ and NVWA) and ensures that the cheeses in question may continue to be sold on the Dutch market.

In view of the growth potential of Listeria monocytogenes and in order to cover the associated risks in the product category in question, however, substantial measures need to be taken by Dutch importers/processors and their suppliers abroad. The applicable requirements are laid down in the SAR referred to above.

The product risk of each (foreign) cheese type is determined on the basis of measured chemical product parameters (pH, water activity, moisture content, salt content, acetic & lactic acid content). In worst case conditions, generic FSSP modelling is used to determine whether Listeria monocytogenes can grow. The product risk is expressed in terms of: Low, Medium or High.

In addition, the producer risk is determined. Based on an assessment, it is determined whether the producer has a low, medium or high risk.

In order to perform correct risk assessment, the Dutch importers/processors require the cooperation of the producers of the foreign types of cheese. The producers are further informed through their Dutch clients, and are asked to complete an extensive questionnaire. The Dutch food authorities are to monitor the agreed SAR.

It is essential that the producers of foreign types of cheese complete and return the questionnaire.

*

<https://www.nvwa.nl/documenten/consument/eten-drinken-roken/levensmiddelenketen/publicaties/microbiologische-criteria-interpretatiedocument-nvwa-informatieblad-85>