

AQIS Testing Prawns and Honey

Important information for all importers!

Late last year AQIS (Australian Quarantine and Inspection Service) announced that it was introducing more stringent testing for imported prawns (shrimps). This has been extended to honey with effect from April, 2004.

They are testing for the antimicrobial *nitrofurans* family which includes *furazolidone*, *furaltidone*, *nitrofurantoin* and *nitrofurazone*. These are synthetic broad-spectrum antimicrobial agents which are still prescribed for humans but which Australia prohibited in food producing animals in 1992, the EU in 1995 and the USFDA in 2002.

The new testing regime will be at the rate of 1 consignment in 4 in respect of risk category prawns. Prawns currently classified as 'random surveillance' will be increased to 'active surveillance' and tested at a rate of 1 in 10.

According to AQIS these rates are based on the low health risks, the absence of knowledge about the continued use of nitrofurans overseas and the need for additional data.

Any detection above the level of 1 microgram/Kg will result in the consignment being failed and future imports tested at an increased rate until ongoing compliance is demonstrated.

Nitrofurans are not permitted in any food imported into or sold in Australia.

The other antibiotic family being tested for is *chloramphenicol* which can cause anaemia in humans.

At this stage, the main concern is with farmed prawns. The regulations apply to all forms of farmed prawns – in shell, peeled, partially peeled, cooked or raw, chilled, frozen or canned - and includes value-added products such as crumbed, battered, preserved prawns etc. It excludes fish balls, dim sims, spring rolls etc where the presence of farmed prawn is greatly reduced.

The use of antibiotics in farmed prawns has come about following the relatively recent growth in the farmed prawn industry in South-East Asian countries.

Attracted by promises of huge profits, some prawn farmers may resort to unapproved means to maximise growth and reduce infection in their stock. Farmers are reported to use lime, pesticides and other chemicals to clean the ponds before stocking them. They then use antibiotics and growth hormones to produce higher yields.

The EU and UK testing agencies have found problems with shipments of farmed prawns from China, Thailand, Vietnam, Pakistan, India, Bangladesh and Indonesia.

To date, in Australia, 56 consignments have been tested and 5 have been rejected because of their *nitrofurans* levels.



So what does this mean for Australian prawn importers?

- Know your supplier and ensure they adhere to codes of practice covering food safety eg: in Thailand prawn farms can be certified by the Fisheries Dept. as passing the 'good aquaculture' code of conduct.
- Look for suppliers that use sustainable farming methods which tend to be freer of disease eg: using natural tides to refresh pond water.
- Ensure that imported product is adequately tested to meet AQIS standards before shipment.
- Check with your insurer as to whether or not you are covered for rejection of prawns if they are found to be contaminated with either of these antibiotics.
- Modification of the terms of cover are probable as Underwriters become aware of the new regulations and rejections result from increased inspections.

Useful web-sites:

www.aqis.gov.au
www.growfish.com.au
www.foodstandards.gov.au
(search for nitrofurans)

**The Team at
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