

Opening Statement to the Joint Committee on Agriculture and the Marine.

24th November 2020.

Charlie McConalogue, TD, Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine

Mr. Chairman, I welcome this opportunity to update the Committee on the recall issued by my Department for Virapro sanitizer products.

I would like to briefly recount the specific issue that arose with Virapro. In the first instance, OLAF, the European Anti-Fraud Office, notified the Revenue Commissioners regarding the import of a hand sanitiser product from Turkey to Ireland, from the same supplier of a product that had been tested in Denmark and found to contain excessive levels of methanol.

Arrangements were made to test the consignment and a number of other consignments that had already been imported into Ireland from the same supplier. All consignments that were tested were detained, pending the results of the laboratory analysis.

Indicative test results were received on 6th October. I wish to take this opportunity to correct one specific point in my statement of October 23rd to Dáil Éireann. I stated then that preliminary results had been received on 8th October. I should have said that preliminary results were received on 6th October. Following receipt of these results, my Department informed the HSE of initial concerns about the safety of the detained consignments of sanitiser. These concerns were based on indicative results only, without confirmatory results from a validated test method.

Confirmatory results were received on the 16th October. These confirmed that the composition of the registered product was not consistent with the approved specification, and therefore there were concerns around efficacy and public health.

A compliance notice to recall this product from the market and from public use was issued to the supplier on Friday 16th October. The product was officially removed from the official register of biocides on Tuesday 20th October, and contacted the procurement service of the Department of Health and Skills the same day. Then on 22nd October my Department also issued formal notification to Departments of Education and HSE, apprised the Department of children and Youth Affairs and also took the additional step of issuing a public statement outlining the possible risks posed by ViraPro and advising members of the public not to use it. I was advised of the issue that evening.

Since affected Virapro sanitizer was removed from the national biocides register in October, my Department has been proactively engaging with the supplier to ensure that its instructions to recall product are complied with in full and that no further sanitiser product from the original Turkish supplier is placed on the market.

My Department has also made arrangements with the Revenue Commissioners to detain any further consignments from the Turkish manufacturer in question and notify the Department.

At the same time, in order to assist with a wider EU level examination of how this product came to breach compliance with regulations on content, all confirmatory laboratory results are being shared with OLAF.

The responsibility for the withdrawal of products rests with the company concerned. It had become clear by 22nd October that the recall of products had not yet commenced. Officials in the Pesticide Controls Division continued to engage actively with the company to ensure a full recall could be made. However, while the company demonstrated some compliance with the recall instruction, further deadlines of 28th October and most recently 12th November for a full and verified recall of affected Virapro sanitiser products have not been met to my Departments satisfaction.

Officials of the Pesticide Controls Division continue to engage with the supplier to ensure that the recall of all product concerned is fully completed. I have taken the added step of asking the Investigations Division of the Department to carry out a full investigation in relation to the circumstances around the importation of this product.

I regard the protection of public health as our key priority.

To ensure this, my Department continues to sample and test biocide products currently on the market to ensure their continued compliance with regulatory standards and thereby provide the necessary assurance of public safety.

In this regard, 75 sanitiser products have been sampled and analysed since the end of October.

I am happy to report that no safety issues have been found with any of the products checked.

I believe our actions, together with the arrangements made with the Office of the Revenue Commissioners to detain consignments of concern from Turkey at the earliest stage was fully appropriate.

Finally, chairman, I am very conscious of the need to ensure that new sanitiser products are evaluated and registered in a timely fashion to ensure a wide range of safe products is always available to the public.

Accordingly, staff numbers in the Biocides Unit dealing with product registrations are being increased significantly to ensure that processing times of new applications are reduced.

The members of the committee will be aware that there has been a very large increase in applications since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, to approximately 500 hand sanitiser applications compared to a normal 50 per year.

I am, however, satisfied that sufficient supplies of sanitiser are available to the public to support Government's actions on Covid19, with over 450 products currently approved and listed on the national register of biocides.