



ILLEGAL SLAUGHTER: FOOD LAW COMPLIANCE, TRACEABILITY AND OFFICIAL CONTROLS

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Foods of animal origin entering the market outside authorised distribution channels represent a significant challenge for food safety, as they bypass official veterinary controls and traceability requirements. This study reports an enforcement case identified during official controls in ethnic food retail establishments, highlighting the detection of meat products suspected to originate from clandestine slaughter.

Official inspections were conducted in ethnic food retail establishments in the San Lorenzo-Vicaria district (Naples, Italy) between January 2024 and December 2024, as part of a coordinated national control programme promoted by the Italian Ministry of Health to detect illegally imported or distributed foods of animal origin. A total of 25 establishments were inspected using standard official control procedures, including the assessment of hygienic and structural conditions, verification of traceability documentation, and evaluation of compliance with food safety legislation.

Among the 25 inspected establishments, 22 showed non-compliances related to traceability and labelling requirements, while three fresh meat retail establishments were found to be marketing products outside the authorised distribution chain. The products included whole heads of adult sheep and goats with skin, horns, eyes, tongue, teeth and brain intact; untreated bovine offal; bovine feet with skin, hair and hooves; bovine ears; and muscle cuts covered with skin. Several products showed evidence of flame-singeing and dehairing. Ovine and caprine heads displayed perforations and lacerations at the anatomical sites corresponding to official ear tags, suggesting the deliberate removal of animal identification devices. None of the products bore the mandatory health identification mark or was accompanied

by traceability documentation, supporting the hypothesis that the animals had been slaughtered clandestinely outside authorised slaughterhouses and without the required ante-mortem and post-mortem veterinary inspections. This hypothesis was further reinforced by the presence of heads from adult animals with intact brains, representing a specified risk material that, above the age thresholds established by Bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) legislation, must be removed and disposed of exclusively in approved establishments. Subsequent investigations led to the discovery of a rudimentary grilling structure inside an abandoned building, including LPG cylinders connected to gas burners and scattered remains of singed animal tissues. The improvised facility consisted of a metal plate and wire mesh supported by steel drums, showing extensive signs of combustion and operating in an unhygienic environment exposed to external contamination. Based on the inspection findings, approximately 650 kg of refrigerated and frozen bovine and ovine/caprine meat and offal were placed under official sanitary detention and subsequently subjected to judicial seizure. The Judicial Authority was notified of the suspected offence of clandestine slaughter against unknown persons.

Official controls proved effective in detecting illegally distributed meat products and identifying severe violations of traceability and food safety requirements associated with suspected clandestine slaughter. These findings highlight the importance of coordinated surveillance and enforcement activities to prevent meat of unknown origin from entering the legal food chain and to reduce potential public health risks arising from uncontrolled biological, chemical, and parasitological hazards.