

## Meat from 20 QC marts up for tests

Philippine Daily Inquirer · 11 Jan 2020 · A1 · —STORY BY KARL OCAMPO AND MARIEJO RAMOS

After meat samples tainted with the African swine fever (ASF) virus were found in two Quezon City supermarkets, Mayor Joy Belmonte on Friday said meat products from 20 other groceries in the city would be tested at the Bureau of Animal Industry to ensure that food safety regulations were being followed. Some 300 kilos of meat will be subjected to inventory and inspection.



Following the discovery of meat products tainted with the African swine fever (ASF) virus in two Quezon City supermarkets early this week, Quezon City Mayor Joy Belmonte said meat from 20 other supermarkets in the city would be taken for testing at the Bureau of Animal Industry (BAI) to ensure that food safety regulations were being followed.

Nolan Velasco, city ASF action officer, said some 300 kilos of meat from the grocery stores would be subjected to inventory and inspection.

During her first consultative meeting with supermarket owners on Friday, Belmonte said she would release an executive order listing new protocols and internal control systems addressing the ASF issue in grocery stores.

But the two supermarkets earlier found to have ASF-tainted meat will not be sanctioned, Belmonte said.

“Sometimes the punitive measure is not the most effective measure,” she told reporters after meeting with representatives from major supermarkets, including SM, Puregold, Robinsons, Landers and S&R, and meat supplier Northstar.

“I don’t want to sanction them because they had complete requirements and they cooperated when we discovered the ASF-tainted meat,” Belmonte said, adding that the supermarkets showed no intent to deceive the public or put the health of consumers at risk.

Only if there’s bad faith

Establishments with ASF-tainted meat will only be sanctioned if they “demonstrated bad faith,” like if they concealed or disposed of the specimen without reporting the case to the city government, Belmonte said.

Earlier this week, tainted pork products were found at the SM Cherry Supermarket and another grocery store along Doña Carmen Avenue, Commonwealth. Belmonte declined

to name the second store, saying she would leave it up to its owners to issue a statement to the public.

The mayor also noted that the supermarkets and their suppliers had secured a certification from the National Meat Inspection Service saying their meat products were ASF-free before the discovery of the tainted meat.

She pointed out that the meat did not come from hogs raised or sold in Quezon City. “Nonetheless, this (situation) should be under control. But the approach we chose is not aggressive and combative, but collaborative,” she added.

Traced to Bulacan supplier

Retailers found keeping ASF-tainted meat should shoulder the cost of the disposal, Belmonte said.

According to the Department

of Agriculture (DA), the tainted meat products found in the two Quezon City stores came from the Northstar Meat Cutting Plant and Cold Storage, a company operating in Bulacan province, where swine flu infections have earlier been confirmed.

“It was further traced back and it was found that the pigs came from a farm with a valid certification of ASF-free status, a shipping permit issued by the BAI, and a veterinary health certificate issued by a local government unit veterinarian,” the DA statement said.

No signs of hemorrhage

Northstar maintained that its employees did not see any hog carcass with reddish polka dots or signs of hemorrhage, some of the identifying marks of meat tainted with ASF.

The DA said there would be a “further and deep investigation” into the matter, as it noted gaps in the process of slaughtering and transporting meat.

While the hog disease does not pose any health risks to humans, the presence of ASF in meat products being sold in supermarkets may depress the demand for pork, which is only starting to pick up of late following a series of ASF outbreaks that began last year. At the height of the outbreak, consumers avoided pork and pork products as a precaution, which led to a drop in market price.

Supermarkets can't tell

Steven Cua, president of the Philippine Amalgamated Supermarket Association, said that while their suppliers were reliable, it was hard for supermarket owners to identify virus-affected meat products.

“Supermarkets are not equipped to tell if the meat is tainted with the ASF virus, that's why they should learn to identify it just by ocular inspection,” Cua said.

In November, villages in Quezon City earlier found with ASF-infected pigs were declared clear of the virus.

Under a new ordinance taking effect next month, the local government is imposing a citywide ban on the operation of backyard piggeries and poultry farms.