

# Total Recall

What do Styrofoam, cow udders, melamine, and flea collars have in common? Each has been discovered in commercial pet food found in stores across the United States. Writer **Mark Hawthorne** reveals the scary details in this exposé on the multi-billion-dollar-a-year pet-food industry.

SOMETHING WAS WRONG WITH GROVER. The British Shorthair was always a hearty eater, but suddenly he wouldn't touch the cat food he normally loved. An urgent visit to the vet gave Emily Tompkins, Grover's guardian, some grave news: he was suffering from kidney failure. A few days in the hospital and some TLC put Grover on the road to recovery. Even his appetite was returning. "So I gave him the same food he always eats," says Tompkins. Sadly, it would be several weeks before the pet-food manufacturer warned the public their food was killing cats and dogs. By then, Grover had relapsed and was gone.

The massive recall that was finally announced to the public on March 16, 2007, affected some 200 brands of dog and cat food. Though the crisis eventually involved many pet-food manufacturers—including American Nutrition, Blue Buffalo, Chenango Valley Pet Food, and Iams—it was Menu Foods, the largest maker of wet cat and dog food in North America, that initiated the recall.

The tragedy began to unfold in February 2007, when animal guardians like Tompkins started complaining to Menu Foods that dogs and cats were dying after consuming its pet food. Canada-based Menu Foods began testing its food on animals in February, reportedly killing seven of them (see sidebar). Finally, on March 15, the company alerted the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) that they would be issuing a recall of their pet food the next day. (As of press time, Menu Foods had not returned phone calls for this article.)

The FDA mobilized a team of inspectors, who arrived at Menu Foods' plants in Kansas and New Jersey on the day of the recall. By the end of March, the FDA had found a contaminant—melamine—in wheat gluten (used to thicken the gravy in wet pet foods) and traced it to China. Then, in April, they discovered melamine in rice protein, also imported from China.

Things looked suspicious. Melamine, a nitrogen-rich chemical derived from coal, is used to make plastic and fertilizer, and it has no business in food ingredients. But, in China, melamine is quietly used as a cheap additive in livestock feed because its high nitrogen content makes it appear as protein in food tests, fooling farmers into thinking they're buying high-protein feed. The FDA discovered another chemical in the imported wheat gluten and rice protein that shouldn't be present: cyanuric acid. In the United States,



this chemical is added to swimming pools to prevent sunlight from degrading the chlorine. Like melamine, cyanuric acid is used to falsely boost protein levels in animal feed and is generally harmless if ingested.

While melamine and cyanuric acid are not especially toxic on their own, researchers now know that when combined, the two chemicals quickly form insoluble crystals. In a dog or cat, these crystals obstruct the kidneys, leading to renal failure, a rapid decline in health, and, frequently, death.

## Rendered Unhealthy

The heartbreaking events of last spring illustrate just how precarious pet-food safety is. Like agribusiness, which puts a pricey marketing spin on meat, eggs, and dairy foods, the \$13-billion-a-year pet industry goes to great expense to make consumers feel good about pet food. What's not to like? Well, for one thing, dog and cat food has become a dumping ground for slaughterhouses: heads, intestines,

spinal cord tissue, udders, hooves, and other animal remains considered unfit for human consumption are turned into profit by feeding them to Fido and Fluffy.

Moreover, rendering plants sell many pet-food manufacturers material called "tankage," which may contain parts of animals accidentally killed by vehicles, ingredients high in hormone or pesticide residues, expired meat, zoo animals, livestock ear tags, euthanized animals and their flea collars, Styrofoam packaging, and plastic bags. Other contaminants that have been found in commercial dog and cat foods include restaurant grease—complete with high concentrations of dangerous free radicals and trans-fatty acids—antibiotic residues, moldy grain, PCBs, hazardous preservatives, and viral, bacterial, protozoal, fungal, and prion contaminants, the last of which can cause bovine spongiform encephalopathy, better known as mad cow disease.

Among the industry's most controversial practices is using so-called "4-D meat." Flesh from disabled, diseased, dying, or dead animals (who died in transit to the slaughterhouse) may not be allowed on the butcher's counter, but it's perfectly acceptable in your best friend's bowl, even if the meat is filled with cancerous tissue and pharmaceuticals.

The result is a pathogenic smorgasbord that has contributed to a decline in health among companion animals, says Armaiti May, DVM. "Diseases such as diabetes, arthritis, digestive

disorders, cystitis, kidney and liver disease, skin problems, obesity, thyroid dysfunction, and various cancers are becoming more common in our domesticated animals," she says. "This increase in disease incidence is attributed in part to commercial pet foods."

## The Tail Wags the Dog

Veterinarian Michael W. Fox, co-author of *Not Fit for a Dog: The Truth About Commercial Dog and Cat Food*, finds today's pet food unacceptable for animals. "It's not really food," he says, his refined English accent laced with scorn. "It's a manufactured substance."

The massive pet-food recall, according to Fox, is hardly a surprise, coming from an industry characterized by inadequate government oversight and serious issues with product quality. "The recent recall was a wake-up call," he says. "Consumers have to take control. Don't trust the government. The government works for industry."

Alka Chandna, senior researcher with People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (PETA), agrees, saying the tainted-pet-food crisis is symptomatic of how poorly government oversees food safety. "The bigger scandal to PETA has always been the failure of federal agencies to take responsibility to ensure that pet food is safe, and the readiness of federal agencies to roll over when the pet-food lobby includes the discarded and dangerous waste of the human 'food' supply in pet foods," she says. "The fact that unethical business practices are undertaken in China is obviously problematic,

## Animals as Property

As much as we may love animals—and most guardians regard their companion animals as members of the family—they are still merely property according to the law.

"The general rule is that if a dog or cat is killed, his owner can recover only the 'market value,' which is what it would cost to replace the animal," says Joyce Tischler, an attorney and founder of the nonprofit Animal Legal Defense Fund.

So, if you adopt a dog from an animal shelter and he is killed due to another person's negligence, his market value and therefore your damages may be limited to about \$100—the fee to adopt another dog from a shelter. No consideration is given for your emotional loss, something animal law advocates see as nothing short of ridiculous.

"It is time for the legal system to catch up with the rest of us and provide a more just and fair measure of damages when a companion animal is killed," says Tischler. "The class-action lawsuits being filed against Menu Foods will provide the courts with a good opportunity to correct this injustice."

Changing the legal definition of non-human animals as property is one of many steps advocates are attempting to protect our animal companions.



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Although there are a number of organizations that have some lesser responsibility for monitoring pet-food standards in the US—including the FDA,

be 100-percent certain unless we grow and prepare all our own foods.”

That’s essentially what Fox does for his two adopted dogs. Others are simply buying better foods for their furry companions.

Anna Thiel, who manages one of two Jeffrey’s Natural Pet Food stores in San Francisco, says the worry about tainted pet

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which seeks to prevent the adulteration or misbranding of pet food, and the FDA’s Center for Veterinary Medicine, which monitors manufacturers’ health claims—it is actually the Association of American Feed Control Officials (AAFCO) that sets pet-food regulations. Yet AAFCO is not an agency, so it has no enforcement authority and performs no analytical testing on pet food. Moreover, its members charged with developing standards include employees from pet-food companies.

Elizabeth Hodgkins, DVM, put the situation bluntly last year after testifying before a Senate subcommittee in the wake of the pet-food recall. When the pet-food industry rebutted the negative testimony it’d heard, Hodgkins responded: “AAFCO has no real authority over the pet-food companies, and goes along with the desires of an industry that, by the admission of the FDA, is a good way for American agriculture to dispose of by-products that are not fit for or undesirable for humans to eat. Many ingredients in pet food serve no nutritional purpose in our pets, but keep farmers and ranchers from having to throw them away.”

### Ciao, Commercial Chow?

All this leaves consumers asking an obvious question.

“Are pet foods safe? Sure, as safe as your and my food,” says Paul Pion, DVM, president of the Veterinary Information Network, a web-based group that counts 30,000 veterinarians and vet students as members. “At the same time, no system is perfect or can guarantee every ingredient every single day, and so there is always room for inadvertent problems, whether it be E. coli in a spinach field or some unforeseen contaminant in a bag of potato chips or dog food. None of us can ever

food is bringing in plenty of new customers. “The recall has also created a greater awareness of how products relate to food allergies in animals,” she adds. “For example, poor-quality grains can contain aflatoxin,” a fungus found on corn that can cause severe liver damage in animals. Taking control of our companion animals’ health is critical, observes Fox, who has been researching pet food for 30 years. He believes the best way guardians can ensure the welfare of their animal companions is to make food at home, thus reducing the incidence of chronic degenerative diseases and endocrine and immune system disorders. “You’ll also see overall improved physical condition, skin, coat, vitality, and temperament,” he says. And you’re practically eliminating the risk of pet-food contamination.

The nascent trend in home-cooked (or even raw) meals for companion animals owes much to fears that commercial products are unsafe, but homemade pet-food recipes often require animal flesh. Since a meat grinder is sure to throw off a kitchen’s ethical *feng shui*, natural-pet-food retailers like Jeffrey’s offer prefab options. Homemade kibble is also gaining in popularity, with books and businesses catering to home cooks meeting consumer demand. James Peden, author of *Vegetarian Cats and Dogs*, has developed Vegepet supplements—which he sells through his company, Harbingers of a New Age—to add to vegetarian and vegan recipes. “We’ve had good success these last 22 years helping folks switch their companion animals to a properly supplemented vegan diet,” he says.

Although dogs are nutritionally omnivorous and can do well on a vegan diet, cats are another matter. Fox is adamant that domestic cats should be fed meat. “Cats are obligate carnivores,” he says. “Vegan diets are *not* for



## PetFood’s HiddenIngredient

Vivisection is one of the pet-food industry’s dirty secrets: they conduct invasive tests on dogs, cats, and other animals. Indeed, Menu Foods confirmed its pet food caused death last year by feeding it to animals in laboratories.

PETA’s investigation inside Sinclair laboratory, a contract laboratory where Menu Foods and Iams pet foods were being tested on animals, revealed horrific conditions, says Alka Chandna, PhD, a senior researcher with PETA. “Our investigator documented dogs who had gone crazy from intense confinement in barren steel cages and cement cells, dogs who had been left on a filthy paint-chipped floor after chunks of muscle had been hacked from their thighs, dogs whose vocal cords had been severed, and horribly sick dogs and cats who were languishing in their cages, neglected and left to suffer without veterinary care,” she says.

The USDA cited and fined Sinclair for 40 violations of the Animal Welfare Act. Despite such cruelty, Menu Foods and other companies continue to buy animals from breeders and use them in tests.

❖❖❖ **What You Can Do:** Don’t purchase pet food from companies that test on animals. Visit [iamscruelty.com](http://iamscruelty.com) for more ways to help.



## VeganMeowChow

While dogs are omnivores and adjust easily to a plant-based diet, “cats are biologically carnivores,” says Armaiti May, DVM. “But in many cases they can be successfully maintained on a vegan diet as long as it meets all of their nutritional requirements and their overall health is adequately monitored.” Among May’s recommendations:

...❖ In addition to the 9 amino acids all mammals need, felines require arginine and taurine. (Taurine is found naturally in meat but can be supplied in synthetic form.)

...❖ Be wary of feline lower urinary tract disease, which is more likely in male cats eating a vegan diet high in magnesium. Bring your cat to a veterinarian about two weeks after switching him to a vegan diet to have his urine pH tested.

...❖ Although adding mock meats and nutritional yeast to vegan cat food may help, some cats will refuse to eat, especially if they are sick. Cats who don’t eat for a prolonged period are at high risk for *hepatic lipidosis* (fatty liver syndrome), a serious condition requiring extended hospitalization.

...❖ Be patient when transitioning your cat to a vegan diet if they’ve been accustomed to eating meat.



Home-cooking your animal companion’s meals is one way to ensure food safety.

cats. Period. You can’t go against biology—it’s anthropomorphic abuse.” Fox explains that cats lack the enzymes required to create certain fatty acids and amino acids, such as taurine. While canines and humans can synthesize nutrients from plant sources, felines must get them from animal protein and fat.

Most veterinarians agree that cats must eat meat, but there are others, like May, who believe some cats *can* thrive on plant-based foods, provided the cat’s guardian supplements their diet with essential nutrients and is aware of the potential health complications. She cautions that a vegan diet

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can cause the urine pH to be more alkaline in some cats (plants have a higher alkaline pH, while the pH in meat is more acidic), increasing the risk for struvite crystals and stones. “Therefore,” she says, “cat guardians who decide to put their cat on a vegan diet should bring the cat to their veterinarian to have the urine pH tested one to two weeks after switching them to a vegan diet and then once a month for the first several months to ensure the pH remains stable. If the pH is too high, there are urinary acidifiers that may help the urine pH to be more acidic, including vitamin C.”

May stresses urinary blockage is a potentially lethal ailment. “For cat guardians who find it too tedious to monitor their cat’s urine pH, they should perhaps consider feeding them a non-vegetarian cat food or not keeping a cat as a companion.” Cat guardians could also try a special pH-adjusted vegan formula available through Harbingers of a New Age.

Whether motivated by ethics or concerns about contaminated ingredients, more guardians than ever are turning to veg options for their companions. “Our sales have more than doubled over the last year,” says Eric Weisman, founder of Evolution Diet, a manufacturer of vegan dog and cat foods. Among Evolution Diet’s distributors is Vegan Cats, now run by Courtney Ernster and her husband, Ryan Wilson (they also own Vegan Essentials). “In the year and a half we’ve owned Vegan Cats, sales have increased 40 percent,” says Ernster, who adds they receive

countless emails from people anxious about pet-food safety. Sales of vegan pet foods offered by e-tailer Downbound, meanwhile, have been expanding steadily over the last year, though general manager Rob Karbaum doesn’t attribute the increase to tainted pet food. “We did speak to a lot of people who had decided to abandon commercial food items and start making their own food, however,” he says.

Guardians who transition their animals to a vegan diet should do so gradually, says May—mixing the two foods in different proportions until the vegan food is given exclusively—to

minimize the occurrence of gastrointestinal disturbances such as diarrhea and vomiting. Oh, and that saucer of milk for your cat? “Many cats do enjoy the taste of cow’s milk,” says May, “but their digestive tracts are not designed to process it. In very small amounts it might be okay to give, but not on a regular basis.”

Whenever making major diet changes for a dog or cat, it’s wise to consult with the animal’s veterinarian. They can provide guidance on health issues, but, unfortunately, they don’t necessarily have all the answers: Veterinarians didn’t know for weeks about the tainted pet food, for example (indeed, some sources indicate Menu Foods was receiving complaints about pet deaths as early as December 2006, perhaps keeping vets in the dark for three months). Clearly, the well-being of companion animals is ultimately in the hands of their guardians, which may be the best argument of all for preparing pet foods at home, from whole ingredients you buy yourself.

## Courting Closure

After initially denying any involvement in the contamination scandal, the Chinese government eventually acknowledged that two companies had spiked the feed they were selling with fake protein. Chinese officials shut down both companies in July, later agreeing to increase inspections on a number of products, including pet-food ingredients.

The trail of duplicity also led investigators to ChemNutra, Inc., a Las Vegas-based importer. US authorities say the Chinese

Unscrupulous importation laws and deliberate mislabeling of ingredients yielded lethal results for animals in 2007.



companies deliberately mislabeled 800 tons of contaminated wheat gluten to avoid inspection in China, and ChemNutra relabeled it in the US so manufacturers wouldn't suspect a problem. In February, a federal grand jury indicted all three companies, though it is unclear whether the US can extradite executives from China or enforce fines against their companies.

For its part, the FDA, reeling from criticism on how it handled the crisis (Senator Dick Durbin called the agency's response "tragically slow"), has a new food protection plan and is requesting a budget increase to safeguard the US food supply. Nonetheless, many remain skeptical of how effective the FDA's efforts will be. "As long as government agencies continue to kowtow to corporate interests, consumer interests will not be served," says Alka Chandna.

Some consumers are fighting back. As animal guardians like Emily Tompkins cope with the grief and anger shared by thousands of others, the largest pet-food recall in US history could result in a record number of lawsuits. Adding insult to injury, however, the law regards animals as property—things with no more intrinsic value than lawn tools or stereo equipment—denying anguished guardians any compensation for their emotional distress.

For Michele Suggett and Don James, who lost their dog Shasta, suing Menu Foods for wrongful death is both a way to hold the company responsible and to raise the public's awareness about pet-food safety. "We don't

want this to happen to anyone ever again," says Suggett.

Some guardians are hoping these lawsuits will change how courts view companion animals, but others, like animal-law expert Bruce Wagman, aren't holding their breath. "The property paradigm is an entrenched and integral aspect of most of society's interactions with animals," he says. "But the law can allow for a recovery for an animal's loss without changing the property status, and courts may think there is no reason to alter animals' property status in these pet-food lawsuits. Also, since there is no federal law on the amount of compensation for the loss of one's animal, there's not much here that's precedent-setting. Courts in cases like these are more likely to follow the prior trends in the law than to blaze new ground."

Of course, regardless of the outcome, no lawsuit can ever assuage the heartache of losing a loved one. "Our house is not a home," says Tompkins, who has yet to adopt another cat more than a year later. "Grover is still the little guy in my heart."

For more information about pet food and recalls, visit [howl911.com](http://howl911.com). **VN**

**Mark Hawthorne** lives with five rabbits, all of whom eat better than he does.

**Government-mandated food protection plans could save the lives of beloved companion animals like Grover.**



## Compassionate Bites

Although we haven't personally taste-tested them, here are some of the most widely available plant-based products for dogs and cats that are the next best thing to homemade:

**Boston Baked Bonz**—offering healthy vegan treats for dogs. ...❖ [bostonbakedbonz.com](http://bostonbakedbonz.com)

**Doggy Delights**—vegan-owned company makes gourmet dog treats. ...❖ [vegan-delights.com](http://vegan-delights.com)

**Downbound**—distributor of a large variety of vegan dog and cat foods, treats, and accessories. ...❖ [downbound.com](http://downbound.com)

**Evolution Diet**—manufactures health food for dogs, cats, and ferrets. ...❖ [petfoodshop.com](http://petfoodshop.com)

**Harbingers of a New Age**—provides supplementation products to add to your home-cooked whole-food meals for vegan cats and dogs. ...❖ [vegepet.com](http://vegepet.com)

**PetGuard**—offers a vegan moist dog food and two varieties of vegan dog biscuits. ...❖ [petguard.com](http://petguard.com)

**Raw Dog Action Snacks**—vegetarian snacks made with organic vegetables and sprouted seeds. ...❖ [rawdognsnacks.com](http://rawdognsnacks.com)

**V-Dogfood**—sells a high-protein vegan dog food that ships for free. ...❖ [v-dogfood.com](http://v-dogfood.com)

**Vegan Cats**—distributor of vegan foods, natural supplements, and environmentally friendly products for cats and dogs. ...❖ [vegancats.com](http://vegancats.com)