

Press Release, 12 April 2023

## Animal welfare and environmental organisations demand a ban on blood farms

### Accusations of greenwashing against Icelandic pharmaceutical company Isteka

**Berlin, Frankfurt, Freiburg (12 April 2023).** The animal welfare and environmental organisations Animal Welfare Foundation (AWF), Bund für Umwelt und Naturschutz Deutschland e. V. (BUND), Deutscher Tierschutzbund, and the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) criticise the fact that blood is collected from pregnant mares in Icelandic blood farms in order to obtain the fertility hormone PMSG (eCG) to boost the productivity of German pig farms. The aforementioned associations criticise the statements of the Icelandic pharmaceutical company Isteka claiming that PMSG has a positive impact on climate, species, and animal protection, calling them greenwashing. Isteka currently procures approx. 120 metric tonnes of blood from 90 blood farms with a total of 4,779 female Icelandic horses. “PMSG is declared a veterinary medicinal product and is used in industrial animal production without a real medical indication for treatment. It serves a purely economic interest. In Germany, the hormone is used in up to 30 % of pig breeding farms”, state the associations.

“PMSG thus becomes part of the history of cheap meat at any cost.” WWF Germany

An AWF documentary from 2021 shows the mares being systematically tortured during blood collection. They are forced into the restraint boxes by being beaten with iron pipes, sticks, and wooden beams and then fixed with ropes in an unnatural position to have 15 % of their blood collected in just a few minutes. Ever since these facts became public, the pharmaceutical company Isteka has been under massive pressure to justify their actions and has been trying to make light of the production of PMSG. For example, Isteka claims that the hormone PMSG has enormous ecological benefits. Isteka Head of Communications Kristinn Hugason talks about a “green molecule” meant to minimise the ecological footprint of industrial livestock production. “Using the hormone is extraordinarily beneficial to the environment at a global level while at the same time promoting literal animal welfare and the development of the animals in which it is used.”

Moreover, Isteka claims that the use of PMSG “in pig breeding leads to savings on animal feed in the form of grain that amount to more than one million metric tonnes per year.” And if the animals were less fertile, the company claims, there would be a need for more animals, resulting in increased costs for housing, energy, and infrastructure as well as a bigger ecological footprint.

“Isteka must have miscalculated”, says Sabrina Gurtner, Project Manager at AWF. “Mother sows only live half as long in industrial pig farms as they do in organic farming. They are slaughtered at the young age of three or four. In order to make up for that demand, a corresponding number of mother sows must be raised to fill that gap. It takes seven or eight months for them to reach sexual maturity, and during that time they must be fed and their manure must be disposed of.” Rolf Sommer, Director Agriculture and Land Use Change at WWF, adds: “This idea of being ‘extraordinarily beneficial to the environment’ is a theoretical abstraction model. It would be much more important to rely on locally sourced animal feed rather than soy from deforestation areas.”

Esther Müller from the German animal welfare organisation Deutscher Tierschutzbund confirms that extreme fertility enhancement has grave consequences for the health of a sow: “About one third of sows in Germany is prematurely slaughtered or killed due to reproductive disorders that are usually management-related. Therefore, reproductive issues are the leading cause of death for sows in Germany. The use of hormones such as PMSG is an enormous factor in that.”

BUND calls it dubious to ascribe a positive impact on the environment to the use of PMSG. “In many sow farms in Germany, the use of PMSG is a fundamental building block in keeping up the system of factory farming with all its negative effects on climate, air, water, and nature”, says Matthias Meißner, Head of Biodiversity at BUND. “What we need is the reorganisation of animal husbandry and adequate prices for farmers, not pricey lubricants to keep the current system up and running.”

The statement of Arnthór Gudlaugsson, Managing Director of Isteka, that PMSG “has also been successfully used in the breeding and protection of other animals, such as species on the red list or threatened by extinction” has been challenged by the WWF. As the WWF has repeatedly shown and detailed in various studies, a system of industrialised animal farming contributes considerably to the climate crisis and the extinction of species. “The greenhouse gas emissions caused by our food systems make up for approximately one third of the total emissions caused by man”, explains Rolf Sommer. The pharma groups MSD Animal Health and Ceva Santé Animale are the main customers for PMSG from Iceland. “None of their PMSG drugs lists target animal species that are threatened by extinction. Only farm animals are mentioned in the package leaflet”, adds Sabrina Gurtner.

Isteka claims that synchronising the birth of piglet litters with the help of PMSG is conducive to the health and welfare of the animals, particularly the piglets. “The purpose of the hormone treatment is above all to enhance the performance of the sows and to synchronise workflows”, says Esther Müller. “PMSG causes the sows to become downright cachectic. Litter sizes can be exceptionally big, which leads to complications and a large number of stillborn, underweight, or less viable piglets. These are the actual consequences of using hormones to mess with physiological processes.”

“Organic farming and NEULAND show that it is not necessary to use PMSG, and even in conventional sow farming there are businesses which make a conscious decision not to use PMSG”, says Matthias Meißner.

The use of hormones in sows without any medical indication and the collection of PMSG from pregnant mares are in violation of animal protection rules. AWF, BUND, Deutscher Tierschutzbund, and WWF are asking the German government to ban the import, production, and use of PMSG and to make a case for such a ban at the EU level, too. The European Parliament already passed a resolution on that matter in October 2021.

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## **Learn more**

Documentaries about blood farms in Iceland

**ZDF planet e:** [www.zdf.de/dokumentation/planet-e/planet-e-stutenfarmen--pferdeleid-fuer-unser-schnitzel-100.html](http://www.zdf.de/dokumentation/planet-e/planet-e-stutenfarmen--pferdeleid-fuer-unser-schnitzel-100.html)

**Arte Re:** <https://youtu.be/LMD9aAr8ZQI>

**AWF documentary 2021:** <https://youtu.be/SkHP65O4RUg>

**AWF documentary 2023:** <https://youtu.be/Scu2BLJ4KGs>

Isteka statements in the media:

[www.bbl.is/skodun/lesendaryni/ja%CC%81kvaed-loftslagsa%CC%81hrifblo%CC%81dnytja-af-hrossum](http://www.bbl.is/skodun/lesendaryni/ja%CC%81kvaed-loftslagsa%CC%81hrifblo%CC%81dnytja-af-hrossum)

[www.visir.is/g/20212201939d/lyfja-efni-is-teka-gagnast-m.a.-vid-vernd-villtra-dyra](http://www.visir.is/g/20212201939d/lyfja-efni-is-teka-gagnast-m.a.-vid-vernd-villtra-dyra)