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## READER'S RESPONSE

## A balanced perspective on raw frozen diets

Pierre Kemseke responds to the section about BARF pet food in the April 2015 issue of PETS International

Raw frozen meals or B.A.R.F., an acronym for Bones and Raw Feed (also, Biologically Appropriate Raw Food), are gaining in popularity. According to trade practitioners, 10% of all pet food sold in Finland is raw frozen. In Germany, this percentage is as high as 5%, making it a dazzling €100 million (\$112.5 million) market, and in the UK, industry actors estimate this to represent 2% of its entire pet food market (worth: €60 million – \$67.5 million). Yet, as showcased in the previous issue of PETS International magazine (issue 3, April 2015), raw frozen diets are not uncontested. Some claim they are unbalanced, disease-prone and unpractical. Yet, as with any product category, it is fair to say that there are bad products on the markets, as well as good products.

Therefore, when reviewing raw frozen diets, there are a number of things any industry actor or consumer should pay attention to.

### Is the diet balanced?

It goes without saying that any commercially available diet should be balanced, be it dry, wet or raw frozen food for pets. The claim that all raw frozen diets are unbalanced lacks substance and has no ground in reality. Some companies that produce raw frozen diets have actually made substantial investments in balancing their diets. Quite a number of them have veterinarians in their ranks who carefully review all products before they are brought to market.

One of these companies develops all its diets in on-going collaboration with a highly reputed university, ensuring all products are fully balanced. This is done in accordance with the most recent guidelines issued by the NRC and FEDIAF. To that end, the company has developed a proprietary diet simulator which contains the analytical

profiles of over 50 different ingredients, ensuring that every new product that is being marketed is fully balanced. What's more, they have conducted multiple digestibility tests at the university to ensure the products are balanced, not only from an ingredient point of view (what goes 'in'), but also from a digestion point of view (what comes 'out').

### Which meat cuts are used?

It is fair to say that raw frozen diets are among the most transparent diets on the market. That is because raw frozen diets offer unprocessed protein sources, so that the producers have no place to hide: what you see (or smell) is what you get. For instance, the use of feathers or legs as a protein source cannot go unnoticed, as would be the case with processed diets.

Some raw frozen diets only contain real meat as a protein source while others, such as almost any dry food producer, include organs such as liver, lung, stomach, tongue

and more. It is clear that the use of real meat is to be preferred to offal, yet even within the organ category, some can be labelled as beneficial whereas others are plain dangerous. An example of the latter category is the thyroid gland, which is found in the neck and attached to the larynx. If necks are used, thyroid glands should be eliminated, as they could otherwise lead to hyperthyroidism. Paying attention to the ingredient list is therefore the answer, as with any type of pet food.

### What's the source of calcium?

It is a known fact that bones can be harmful sources of calcium. One of the issues related to the use of bones is the potential of oesophagus or stomach perforation, especially for first-time users of bone diets.

Yet, the main issue related to the use of bones in diets is a potentially inadequate level of calcium. Especially with pups, inappropriate calcium levels can have disastrous consequences. The recommended and maximum amount of calcium provided by the NRC and FEDIAF for pups lies within a narrow range. Too much calcium or a lack of calcium can lead to bone deformations.

That is why some raw frozen diet producers have opted for substituting bone with alternative sources of highly digestible calcium, thereby guaranteeing both an adequate intake of calcium and circumventing the risk of perforations.



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### What is being done to limit the presence of harmful bacteria?

Similarly to other producers of pet food (or producers of meat products for human consumption), producers of raw frozen diets are subject to strict EU-wide regulation. With respect to Salmonella, there is a zero tolerance policy; with respect to the presence of enterobacteriaceae, suffice it to say the rules are a factor 10 more stringent for raw frozen pet food than for a human grade hamburger.

Some raw frozen pet food producers have gone further and obtained a GMP (Good Manufacturing Practice) label, thereby striving for the highest quality standards, from ingredient selection, to production and point-of-sale delivery. GMP-label producers have stringent procedures when it comes to sampling. Depending on the status of the supplier, up to every incoming batch is checked for Salmonella and enterobacteriaceae. If the result is not satisfactory, the batch is destroyed. The same goes for all finished products.

Does this mean raw frozen pet food is completely safe? As we know, raw meat (and especially raw poultry meat) can contain raw pathogens. Yet, if producers take the utmost care (and GMP label companies must!) and if consumers take the necessary precautions (by keeping the cold chain intact when buying the product, which includes thawing the product in the fridge, washing their hands after serving the food, avoiding the dog lick their face after finishing his meal,

picking up stools with a glove), the chances of accidents happening are zero to none. But then again, humans take a similar risk when eating their steak tartare.

### And what about raw food being unpractical?

True, dry kibble is probably the most convenient pet food in the world: take out the bag, drop the average recommended daily intake into the bowl and you are done for the day. That's why extruded kibble was invented in the United States in the 1950s, at a time when increased convenience for pet owners became a decisive purchasing factor. Today, with time being an even bigger issue, convenience ranks just as high on the purchase decision scale.

Yet, eventually it is up to consumers. And paradoxically in these busy times where everything needs to be convenient, an increasing number of customers want to go back to nature. For those people, it does not matter that they need to think 12 hours ahead before serving their dog's diet. They are willing to eventually pay this price in order to be able to provide their beloved pet with unprocessed food free of colourants, preservatives and flavour enhancers. They find it as natural as taking frozen bread out of the freezer for the next day.

### Word of advice

So, as with all pet food categories, it is good to take a closer look at specific brands rather than dismissing the entire category. Just like there is good and bad dry kibble, there are

good and bad raw frozen food products. As always, it is eventually up to the trade buyer/consumer to take a close look at the ingredient list and the conditions under which the food has been manufactured; and in case of doubt, contact the manufacturer.