The levels of cancer-causing dioxin in milk and chicken produced by farms located near the Tagarades landfill in Thessaloniki exceeded the maximum levels, scientists from the Democritus National Center for Scientific Research (EKEFE) said yesterday.

A fire recently broke out at the dump and burned for more than a week, prompting fears that local produce would be affected by increased dioxin emissions. EKEFE scientists said that dioxin levels in samples of milk and poultry taken from local farms was up to 30 percent above permissible levels.

Dioxin is a general term that describes a group of hundreds of chemicals that are highly persistent in the environment. Dioxin is formed by burning chlorine-based chemical compounds with hydrocarbons, which occurs most commonly when trash is incinerated.

It is a carcinogenic substance which can also cause reproductive problems, damage the immune system and interfere with people's hormones.

Prefectural officials said they would continue to collect and destroy any milk produced at farms within a 4-kilometer radius of the landfill until dioxin levels dropped.

The Thessaloniki Prefecture also said that its ban on animals in the area roaming freely was still in place. Officials said that livestock had to be kept locked up or moved away from the area around the landfill until further notice.

They also advised residents to avoid eating meat and eggs from free-range animals in the area.

However, EKEFE scientists had better news for fruit and vegetable producers in Thessaloniki, as they said that tests had revealed that local produce was safe for human consumption.

«Consumers have nothing to worry about. There is no problem. Produce such as tomatoes, courgettes and aubergines are fine as long as they are washed properly,» said Thessaloniki's Deputy Prefect Yiannis Bikos. «The milk which is produced in the area of Tagarades, and which is anyway only used to make cheese, has been withdrawn.»
Bikos said that the prefecture felt the results were «optimistic» as officials had expected the readings to be worse.