

WP: Tainted Chinese imports common

What few contaminated products FDA discovers are often shipped again

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Dried apples preserved with a cancer-causing chemical.

Frozen catfish laden with banned antibiotics.

Scallops and sardines coated with putrefying bacteria.

Mushrooms laced with illegal pesticides.

These were among the 107 food imports from [China](#) that the [Food and Drug Administration](#) detained at U.S. ports just last month, agency documents reveal, along with more than 1,000 shipments of tainted Chinese dietary supplements, toxic Chinese cosmetics and counterfeit Chinese medicines.

For years, U.S. inspection records show, China has flooded the [United States](#) with foods unfit for human consumption. And for years, FDA inspectors have simply returned to Chinese importers the small portion of those products they caught -- many of which turned up at U.S. borders again, making a second or third attempt at entry.

Now the confluence of two events -- the highly publicized contamination of U.S. chicken, pork and fish with tainted Chinese pet food ingredients and this week's resumption of high-level economic and trade talks with China -- has activists and members of Congress demanding that the United States tell China it is fed up.

Integral part of food chain

Dead pets and melamine-tainted food notwithstanding, change will prove difficult, policy experts say, in large part because U.S. companies have become so dependent on the Chinese economy that tighter rules on imports stand to harm the U.S. economy, too.

"So many U.S. companies are directly or indirectly involved in China now, the commercial interest of the United States these days has become to allow imports to come in as quickly and smoothly as possible," said Robert B. Cassidy, a former assistant U.S. trade representative for China and now director of international trade and services for Kelley Drye Collier Shannon, a Washington law firm.

As a result, the United States finds itself "kowtowing to China," Cassidy said, even as that country keeps sending American consumers adulterated and mislabeled foods.

It's not just about cheap imports, added Carol Tucker Foreman, a former assistant secretary of agriculture now at the [Consumer Federation of America](#).

"Our farmers and food processors have drooled for years to be able to sell their food to that massive market," Foreman said. "The Chinese counterfeit. They have a serious piracy problem. But we put up with it because we want to sell to them."

Risks of unregulated trade being re-evaluated

U.S. agricultural exports to China have grown to more than \$5 billion a year-- a fraction of last year's \$232 billion U.S. trade deficit with China but a number that has enormous growth potential, given the Chinese economy's 10 percent growth rate and its billion-plus consumers.

Trading with the largely unregulated Chinese marketplace has its risks, of course, as evidenced by the many lawsuits that U.S. pet food companies now face from angry consumers who say their pets were poisoned by tainted Chinese ingredients. Until recently, however, many companies and even the federal government reckoned that, on average, those risks were worth taking. And for some products they have had little choice, as China has driven competitors out of business with its rock-bottom prices.

But after the pet food scandal, some are recalculating.

"This isn't the first time we've had an incident from a Chinese supplier," said Pat Verduin, a senior vice president at the Grocery Manufacturers Association, a trade group in Washington. "Food safety is integral to brands and to companies. This is not an issue the industry is taking lightly."

New focus on the problem

China's less-than-stellar behavior as a food exporter is revealed in stomach-turning detail in FDA "refusal reports" filed by U.S. inspectors: Juices and fruits rejected as "filthy." Prunes tinted with chemical dyes not approved for human consumption. Frozen breaded shrimp preserved with nitrofurans, an antibacterial that can cause cancer. Swordfish rejected as "poisonous."

In the first four months of 2007, FDA inspectors -- who are able to check out less than 1 percent of regulated imports -- refused 298 food shipments from China. By contrast, 56 shipments from [Canada](#) were rejected, even though Canada exports about \$10 billion in FDA-regulated food and agricultural products to the United States -- compared to about \$2 billion from China.

Although China is subject to more inspections because of its poor record, those figures mean that the rejection rate for foods imported from China, on a dollar-for-dollar basis, is more than 25 times that for Canada.

Miao Changxia, of the Chinese Embassy in Washington, said China "attaches great importance" to the pet food debacle. "Investigations were immediately carried out . . . and a host of emergency measures have been taken to ensure the hygiene and safety of exported plant-origin protein products," she said in an e-mail.

Meat pours into U.S. despite rules

But deception by Chinese exporters is not limited to plant products, and some of their most egregiously unfit exports are smuggled into the United States.

Under Agriculture Department rules, countries cannot export meat and poultry products to the United States unless the [USDA](#) certifies that the slaughterhouses and processing plants have food-safety systems equivalent to those here. Much to its frustration, China is not certified to sell any meat to the United States because it has not met that requirement.

But that has not stopped Chinese meat exporters. In the past year, USDA teams have seized hundreds of thousands of pounds of prohibited poultry products from China and other Asian countries, Agriculture Secretary Mike Johanns announced in March. Some were shipped in crates labeled "dried lily flower," "prune slices" and "vegetables," according to news reports. It is unclear how much of the illegal meat slipped in undetected.

Despite those violations, the Chinese government is on track to get permission to legally export its chickens to the United States -- a prospect that has raised concern not only because of fears of bacteria such as salmonella but also because Chinese chickens, if not properly processed, could be a source of avian flu, which public-health authorities fear may be poised to trigger a human pandemic.

Last year, under high-level pressure from China, the USDA passed a rule allowing China to export to the United States chickens that were grown and slaughtered in [North America](#) and then processed in China -- a rule that quickly passed through multiple levels of review and was approved the day before Chinese President Hu Jintao arrived in Washington last April.

Chinese birds flying to market?

Now the rule that China really wants, allowing it to export its own birds to the United States, is in the works, said Richard Raymond, USDA's undersecretary for food safety. Reports in China have repeatedly hinted that only if China gets its way on chicken exports to the United States will [Beijing](#) lift its four-year-old ban on importing U.S. beef. Raymond denies any link.

"It's not being facilitated or accelerated through the system at all," Raymond said of the chicken rule, adding that permission for China to sell poultry to the United States is moving ahead because recent USDA audits found China's poultry slaughterhouses to be equivalent to those here.

Tony Corbo, a lobbyist for Food and Water Watch, a Washington advocacy group, said that finding -- which is not subject to outside review -- is unbelievable, given repeated findings of unsanitary conditions at China's chicken slaughterhouses. Corbo said he has seen some of those audits. "Everyone who has seen them was grossed out," he said.

An official response

The Cabinet-level "strategic economic dialogue" with China, which began in September and is scheduled to resume on Wednesday, was described early on as a chance for the United States and China to break a longstanding stalemate on trade issues. When it comes to the safety of imported foods, though, they may highlight the limited leverage that the United States currently has.

It is not just that food from China is cheap, said William Hubbard, a former associate director of the FDA. For a growing number of important food products, China has become virtually the only source in the world.

China now controls 80 percent of the world's production of ascorbic acid, for example, a valuable preservative that is ubiquitous in processed and other foods. Only one producer still makes it in the United States, Hubbard said.

"That's true of a lot of ingredients," he said, including the wheat gluten that was initially thought to be the cause of the pet deaths. Virtually none of it is made any longer in the United States, because the Chinese sell it for less than it would cost U.S. manufacturers to make it.

So pervasive is the U.S. hunger for cheap imports, experts said, that the executive branch itself has repeatedly rebuffed proposals by agency scientists to impose even modest new safety rules for foreign foods.

"Sometimes guidances can get through, but not regulations," said Caroline Smith DeWaal, food safety director at the [Center for Science in the Public Interest](#), an advocacy group. Guidances, which the FDA defines as "current thinking on a particular subject," are not binding.

Tough talk, but actions questioned

Under the Bush administration in particular, DeWaal said, if a proposed regulation does get past agency or department heads, it hits the wall at the [White House Office of Management and Budget](#).

Andrea Wuebker, an OMB spokeswoman, said that the office reviewed 600 proposed rules last year and that it is up to agencies to finalize rules after they are reviewed. She did not tally how many reviews sent agencies' rule-writers back to the drawing board. She noted that some food safety rules have been finalized, including some related to mad cow disease and bioterrorism. Critics point out that the bioterrorism-related regulations were required by an act of Congress.

John C. Bailar III, a [University of Chicago](#) professor emeritus who chaired a 2003 National Academies committee that recommended major changes in the U.S. food safety system -- which have gone largely unheeded -- said he has become increasingly concerned that corporations and the federal government seem willing to put the interests of business "above the public welfare."

"This nation has -- and has had for decades -- a pressing need for a wholly dedicated food safety agency, one that is independent and not concerned with other matters . . . to bring together and extend the bits of food safety activities now scattered over more than a dozen agencies," he said in an e-mail.

Legislation to create such an agency was recently introduced, though many suspect that is too big a challenge politically.

But in the aftermath of the recent food scandals, a growing number of companies and trade groups, including Grocery Manufacturers of America, are speaking in favor of at least a little more protection, starting with a doubling of the FDA's food safety budget.

China is talking tough, too. "Violations of the rules on the use and addition of chemicals or other banned substances will be dealt with severely," said Miao, of the Chinese Embassy.

It is a threat some doubt will be enforced with great vigor, but nonetheless it reveals that China recognizes that the latest scandal has shortened Americans' fuses.

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