

Food Safety Concerns Grow as Imports to US Surge

The FDA is able to inspect only 0.7 percent of all imported food products from more than 130 countries.

After *E. coli* bacteria were found in spinach last October, consumers turned to American-grown produce and asked the burning question: "How'd that get there?"

After pet-sickening melamine was found in wheat gluten from China in March, attention shifted to pet food and people asked: "What's in this stuff?"

Now, with news that Chinese feed suppliers may have intentionally disguised the contents of exports to escape food inspection, the questions have reached the broadest level yet: "With the increased globalization of America's food supply, who should be monitoring all the food coming in from foreign countries?"

The answer depends on whom you ask. Many call for more funding for inspection agencies such as the Food and Drug Administration and the US Department of Agriculture. Others say there must be new, voluntary standards by American importing companies themselves, with the burden and cost of inspection borne by importers. A final set of solutions involves urging the governments of other countries to implement their own standards, with the realization that their international reputations are at stake.

Critics of the current inspection system say the problems have been building for years.

"Our food inspection system in America is broken and collapsing further all the time," says Rep. Rosa De Lauro (D) of Connecticut. Claiming 15 different agencies are subject to 35 different laws, she and Sen. Richard Durbin (D) of Illinois in February reintroduced the Safe Food Act, calling for a single food safety agency and standardized procedures to govern American food safety. The bill requests \$650 million more in 2008 appropriations for the FDA's food inspection program.

Concerns have mounted, Representative De Lauro says, as details have tumbled out from FDA investigations in China showing that melamine-contaminated wheat gluten made it into American pet food. The FDA found that more than 700 tons of mislabeled wheat gluten were shipped out of China through a third-party textile company.

"This is an issue that is going to explode. ... There is probably no food supply as open as ours in the world," says Richard George, professor of food marketing at St. Joseph's University in Philadelphia. "Up to now we've been able to dodge bullets, but the problems we are beginning to see from China are likely just the tip of the iceberg."

More than 130 countries ship food to the United States. According to the FDA, the volume of food imports has been growing steadily – about 15 percent on average per year since 1991. Imported food now makes up more than 10 percent of the food Americans consume, according to the USDA.

Congress in 2002 passed the Bioterrorism Preparedness Act, designed in part to improve food safety. It includes new rules on how all domestic and foreign food facilities must register with the FDA – and give notice for any shipments of human or animal food.

Yet the FDA is able to inspect only 0.7 percent of all imported food products, down from 1.1 percent the previous year. In 2006, that means the FDA inspected just 20,662 shipments out of more than 8.9 million that arrived in US ports – employing about 1,750 food inspectors for ports and domestic food-production plants.

"We have all known for years that the FDA doesn't have enough money or inspectors to do what they need to because of congressional budget cutting," says Jenny Scott of the Food Products Association. "We are going to have to free up more resources for them, and we are going to have to be smarter in how we use them."

Others say that increasing the FDA's budget – even doubling the number of inspections – would still not come close to protecting American consumers. They suggest that importing companies adopt their own standards of inspection, as was done by produce-growing associations in California, which have declared voluntary guidelines for handling food from field to dinner table.

But some in the US say that government regulation and even voluntary guidelines would be burdensome overkill – and wouldn't solve the problems.

“No amount of regulation would have found the melamine,” says Duane Ekedahl, president of the Pet Food Institute. Instead, he says, the Chinese government should step up to help certify its food products – or otherwise be stung by consuming nations that shift their trade to more careful trading partners.

“The US system is not broken; that’s an oversimplification,” says Mr. Ekedahl. “We shouldn’t have to inspect it here. [Foreign governments] should inspect it all there.”

Food industry observers often say that the latest concerns need to be kept in perspective. Infractions are relatively minor compared with the amount of foodstuffs being moved globally, they say.

“The total number of food-borne illnesses has not increased, and that is an important message not to be lost on consumers,” says Dr. David W.K. Acheson, newly-appointed director of the FDA’s food safety and security staff. He says that his appointment in January – with a mandate to develop new strategies and tactics for the 21st century – is an indication that the FDA knows major changes are needed.

But some believe that absent new FDA funding, Dr. Acheson’s appointment will amount to a shifting around of existing departments and resources without the wherewithal to make substantive change.

“This shouldn’t be about someone with a new title and shuttling paper around,” says De Lauro. “We need a whole new understanding of the nature of the problems and possible new solutions. The system is fragmented, has no teeth, and is not set up to properly stop problems before they happen.”

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