



Toxic Food Imports Test FDA

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LOS ANGELES - The food safety net that couldn't catch poisoned pet food ingredients from China also has a much bigger hole.

Billions of dollars' worth of foreign ingredients that Americans eat in everything from salad dressing to ice cream get a pass from overwhelmed inspectors, despite a rising tide of imports from countries with spotty records, according to an Associated Press analysis of federal trade and food data.

In the past five years, the AP found, U.S. food makers prospecting for bargains more than doubled their business with low-cost countries such as Mexico, China and India. Those nations also have the most shipments fail the limited number of checks the FDA makes.

"You don't have to be a Ph.D. to figure out that ... if someone were to put some type of a toxic chemical into a product that's trusted, that could do a lot of damage before it's detected," said Michael Doyle, a microbiologist who directs the University of Georgia's Center for Food Safety.

What Counts As An Ingredient?

Read most any food package's label and there they are: strange-sounding substances that keep soft drinks fizzy, crackers crispy and sauces from going up. Gum arabic helps give light whipped cream its texture; maltodextrin can be dusted on chips so spices stick; caseins help the consistency of cheese substitutes.

In 2001, the United States imported about \$4.4 billion worth of ingredients processed from plants or animals, AP's analysis shows. By last year that total leaped to \$7.6 billion, a 73 percent increase. Other food and drink imports rose from \$38.3 billion to \$63 billion, up 65 percent.

How Overwhelmed Are We?

By its own latest accounting, the FDA only had enough inspectors to check about 1 percent of the 8.9 million imported food shipments in fiscal year 2006.

Today, a House Energy and Commerce subcommittee will hold a hearing on the FDA's oversight of the food supply, with a focus on the recent cases of contaminated spinach, peanut butter and pet food.

What's Causing The Holdup?

Unlike rotting fish or moldy vegetables, ingredient testing often requires a laboratory. Analyzing samples takes days and can irk importers who don't like the choice of holding their product or risking a costly recall if they go ahead with distribution.

To cope with limited resources, the FDA requires that overseas companies announce that a shipment is coming, notification that lets inspectors target products once they arrive.

But except in rare cases, companies don't have to prove that a shipment of ingredients is safe, and the FDA rarely checks whether overseas processing conditions are up to par.

"Unless there's a known problem," said Carl R. Nielsen, a former FDA official, "it's going to fly through."

How Does The FDA Explain It?

The FDA issued two brief statements in response to interview requests, saying imported food ingredients are treated "basically the same as with any food commodity" entering the United States.

Exporting countries are supposed to help. But governments such as China, where tainted food scandals are common, can have a stunning lack of oversight, said William Hubbard, a top FDA official for 14 years who now advocates stiffer food safety regulations.

What's The Risk To People?

Ingredients aren't often blamed for outbreaks of human illness.

One reason is that they may be processed enough that microbes are killed, though as the pet food case shows, chemicals

can remain. Another reason is that connections can be elusive: People sickened by casein, for example, might have consumed anything from cheese to a bodybuilding shake.

Where Is Our Food From?

U.S. neighbors Canada and Mexico were first and third on last year's list of leading ingredient suppliers, and Malaysia was second. China and India were fifth and sixth, just after New Zealand, according to the AP analysis.

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