

U.S. Food Safety Strained by Imports

By JUSTIN PRITCHARD, Associated Press Writer

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The same food safety net that couldn't catch poisoned pet food ingredients from China 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.

Well before contaminated shipments from China killed 16 cats and dogs and sickened thousands more, government food safety task forces worried about the potential human threat — ingredients are hard to quarantine and can go virtually everywhere in a range of brand products.

When U.S. Food and Drug Administration inspectors at ports and border checkpoints look, they find shipments that are filthy or otherwise contaminated. They rarely bother, however, in part because ingredients aren't a priority.

Because these oils, spices, flours, gums and the like haven't been blamed for killing humans, safety checks before they reach the supermarket shelf are effectively the responsibility of U.S. buyers. As the pet deaths showed, however, that system is far from secure.

Meanwhile, the ingredient trade is booming — particularly since 2001, when the Sept. 11 attacks focused attention on the security of the nation's food supply.

Over 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.

Doyle sat on several federal task forces studying threats to U.S. food security; while they discussed ingredients, he said, their findings are classified.

Read down 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, extracted from acacia trees, helps give light whipped cream its texture; maltodextrin is derived from starchy foods, then can be dusted on chips so spices stick; caseins, a protein from milk, help the consistency of cheese substitutes.

While Americans are consuming more imported food and drink from preserved fruit to coffee, demand among U.S. food makers for overseas ingredients is increasing even faster.

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.

No single reason explains the increase. Profits are one factor; changing consumer tastes play a role, too. There's a growing expectation that seasonal products will be available year round, while immigrants may hanker for familiar flavors and others want variety.

So U.S. food makers head overseas, where labor-intensive ingredients can be cheaper to produce in low-wage countries. They're not expensive to ship, either, because they're relatively compact and don't spoil easily, said David Closs, an expert in global food supply at Michigan State University.

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. Topping the list were products with past problems, such as seafood and produce.

"I don't ever remember working on ingredients," said Carl R. Nielsen, a former FDA official whose job until he left in 2005 was to make sure field inspectors were checking the right imports. "That was the lowest priority, a low priority."

On Tuesday, 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. The hearing is part of a broader investigation by lawmakers into the FDA's handling of food safety.

There are other reasons ingredients aren't thoroughly examined. 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.

That leaves quality control, by and large, to American buyers and their suppliers. If they don't do it, they run the risk of health problems that can devastate a brand and generate huge lawsuits.

But except in rare cases, companies don't have to prove that a shipment of ingredients is safe — no tests must show that it's pesticide-free, for example — and the FDA rarely checks whether overseas processing conditions are up to par. That contrasts with meat imports regulated by the Department of Agriculture, which must be processed under conditions equivalent to those here.

"Unless there's a known problem," Nielsen said, "it's going to fly through."

FDA records over the past year reflect that reality:

_ Inspectors refused more than 650 food or drink shipments from China; only about 20 were ingredients. Catfish, eel, shrimp and vegetable products were among the most rejected.

None of the barred shipments was either of the two tainted ingredients — wheat gluten and rice protein concentrate — that led to nationwide pet food recalls. It took the deaths of cats and dogs this spring to trigger tests that revealed an industrial chemical somehow entered the food chain.

_ While inspectors refused the most shipments from India, they didn't turn back any of the top ingredient import from there, a sticky plant extract that helps give frozen

desserts their texture. Although there were no reports of problems with those thickening agents from locust beans or guar seeds, it's unclear how many shipments were inspected and let pass. The \$118 million imported in 2006 made the category the third-largest food from India, behind shrimp/prawns and cashew nuts, and well ahead of rice.

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.

"We use a risk management approach and any regulated product, including food ingredients, IS a priority to FDA if it poses a public health risk," one statement said. "If a food ingredient were to be identified as risk to public health, we are able to quickly shift resources to handle."

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 for stiffer food safety regulations.

He recounted how one supplier drove a truck over tea leaves to dry them with exhaust, which leached lead into the leaves. That was an unintended consequence of a supplier taking a shortcut. Imagine, Hubbard said, what could be done by someone intent on hurting people.

By late last week, federal officials said they were investigating whether the recalled pet foods may have been intentionally spiked with the industrial chemical melamine to boost their apparent protein content.

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.

Even when an ingredient is the suspected culprit, it can be hard to pinpoint.

More than 1,200 children in at least seven states were sickened in 1998 after eating school lunch burritos. Although flour tortillas were identified as the common link, public health officials never determined what was wrong with them.

"Ingredients are more likely to go under the radar screen," said Helen Jensen, an Iowa State University economics professor who studies food safety and international trade.

When they are bad, she said, they present particular problems: They're widely distributed and often used in products with a long shelf life.

When Canadian pet food maker Menu Foods recalled its products last month, they were pulled from shelves nationwide. Three weeks later, the FDA warned that contaminated food may still be circulating.

Last year's list of leading ingredient suppliers reflected the globalized food chain.

While U.S. neighbors Canada and Mexico were first and third, Malaysia was second. Forests in that Asian nation have been replaced by plantations of trees tapped for palm oil, \$250 million of which was sent here. China and India were fifth and sixth, just after New Zealand, according to the AP analysis.

The top ingredient category was the catchall "food preparations," followed by industrial-sized blocks of chocolate, cocoa butter, casein and refined palm oil. Some of the imports can be used in non-edible products; wheat gluten, for example, also is used to make biodegradable "sporks," the combination spoon-fork.

FDA officials have said none of the contaminated wheat gluten from China entered the human food chain. That's little comfort to Jeff Kerner.

Kerner read food labels, paid for all-natural ingredients and figured that would keep his Yorkshire terrier healthy. Instead, Pebbles died last month after eating tainted food.

"All of us, I think, fall into that false sense of security that 'Well, if they put it in there, it must be OK,'" he said. "I understand that it's the bottom line, but at what expense?"

Associated Press graphic artist Jesse Garnier and researcher Julie Reed contributed to this report.