

PolicyPennings by Dr. Daryll E. Ray

Food ingredients can cost less if manufacturing standards are skipped

As we write this column, the story of the melamine laced wheat gluten continues to unfold. On May 7, 2007, the USDA reported that scientists representing five agencies concluded that “there is very low risk to human health from consuming meat from hogs and chickens known to have been fed animal feed supplemented with pet food scraps that contained melamine and melamine-related compounds.”

The next day we learned from a USDA media briefing that the wheat gluten and rice protein was neither wheat gluten nor rice protein. In both cases, the “manufacturers” in China may have simply supplemented wheat flour with melamine and melamine-related compounds to raise the nitrogen level to give both tainted products the appearance of having a higher protein level than they actually did.

At that media briefing, Dr. David Atchison, Assistant Commissioner for Food Protection with the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) also announced “that a portion of the mislabeled wheat gluten from the Chinese firm was sent to Canada and when in Canada was used to manufacture [fish feed], and that that [fish feed] was then imported back into the United States for use in feeding fish in certain industrial aquaculture type situations.”

Two days later the USDA and the FDA held another media briefing at which it was announced that the US has imposed a “countrywide import alert for bulk vegetable protein products from China for which all of those shipments are screened for and targeted 100 percent sampling. That puts the burden on the importer or ultimate firm to demonstrate that the product does not contain melamine or related compounds to the agency.”

While following this story, we ran across a *New York Times* article on Wednesday, May 9, 2007 by Walt Bogdanich and Jake Hooker telling the story of 100 confirmed deaths in Panama as the result of diethylene glycol (an antifreeze ingredient) poisoning. It seems that a firm in China substituted sweet tasting diethylene glycol for sweet tasting glycerin. The diethylene glycol was then mixed into “260,000 bottles of cold medicine—with devastating results. Families have reported 365 deaths from the poison.”

Over the years we have read stories of the results of contaminated or mislabeled products being sold to Chinese citizens, sometimes with deadly results. Sometimes it is infant formula, other times it is seeds or fertilizer or pesticides. The problem is common enough that one can run across Chinese jokes about contaminated products. In a growing economy, China has yet to have in place the kind of quality control system that we take for granted.

And it is at that point that we can draw a few lessons. When we prepare a meal, we do not feel the need to test the flour, the salt, the spices—all of the ingredients—to make sure that they are properly labeled. We trust the laws, the testing agencies, and the manufacturers to ensure that the products we purchase are properly labeled. This trust allows the system to operate with a great degree of efficiency, avoiding constant retesting. At the same time it needs to be recognized that this system imposes costs on US manufacturers and processors.

As we have moved to a global market, sourcing food products from a large number of countries and suppliers, we seem to have assumed that the products we import come from a system that is as trustworthy as ours and that they are properly labeled. As a result we have only tested about 1 percent of the products coming into the country. It now appears that our trust may have been misplaced.

One of the reasons for sourcing products from overseas rather than from domestic sources is because they are cheaper. To the extent that the lower cost of imported products like wheat gluten is the result of less stringent manufacturing and testing requirements, the simple cost comparison may be like the proverbial comparison of apples and oranges. It would seem that in those highly publicized cases we may have traded lower costs for increased risk.

Daryll E. Ray holds the Blasingame Chair of Excellence in Agricultural Policy, Institute of Agriculture, University of Tennessee, and is the Director of UT's Agricultural Policy Analysis Center (APAC). (865) 974-7407; Fax: (865) 974-7298; dray@utk.edu; <http://www.agpolicy.org>. Daryll Ray's column is written with the research and assistance of Harwood D. Schaffer, Research Associate with APAC.

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