

PolicyPennings by Dr. Daryll E. Ray

When it comes to food safety: Trust but verify

The whole issue with tainted wheat gluten being imported into the US and used as a feed ingredient for pet food continues to grab headlines. To date what we know is that a large but undetermined number of pets have died from eating pet food in which melamine laced wheat gluten was one ingredient.

Scientists have yet to definitively identify the connection between the death and the symptoms they see in the deceased animals. Some of the scraps from the production of the pet food was fed to hogs who have made their way into the human food chain.

We also know that as of Monday, May 7, 2007, 20 million chickens are being withheld from the market because the feed they ate contained scraps of the pet food made with the tainted wheat gluten. Officials are trying to determine if the chickens are safe for human consumption.

Prior to 2000, the US produced most of the wheat gluten it used in the baking, cereal, and pet food industries. In that year the US removed quotas on wheat imports and prices fell immediately. Unable to compete with cheap imports a number of plants closed leaving just four domestic wheat gluten manufacturers today.

A May 2, 2007 DTN article quotes national Association of Wheat Growers President John Thaemert, "Imagine if this was a child—instead of 30,000 pets. How about 30,000 children? Would we be thinking, 'Gosh, I am glad I saved a few cents on that loaf of bread I bought?'"

One of the four remaining wheat gluten plants is MPGI, based in Atchison, KS. Steve Pickman, MPG Ingredients' vice president for corporate relations, is quoted in that same DTN as saying, "The US has the most comprehensive regulations of anywhere in the world when it comes to consumable products... understandably there is a cost associated with that. It doesn't come free....But it is a lot less expensive that

the price we are paying now due to a product that has been brought into this country with questionable safety and integrity."

Strangely enough, when it comes to trade negotiations, those safety regulations and food inspection services count against the US. For you see, inspection services that are a part of a system of "control of quality and safety of food, agricultural inputs, and the environment" are a part of the over \$300 billion in farm subsidies that, according to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), industrialized countries pay to their farmers.

As teenagers would say, "EXCUUUSE MEEEE!" We always thought that the benefit of the food standard and inspection services we provide was for the benefit of the consumers, to make sure that we were protected from rancid, tainted and unsafe food. The food inspection process imposes minimum standards on both producers and processors increasing their costs. How is that a subsidy that gives US producers an unfair advantage?

Rather than being a problem, we would think that basic standards and inspection processes would and should be a basic part of any trade negotiation regimen. Buyers in an international market should be assured that they are getting what they pay for.

Open markets depend on trust, but given the money that can be made selling tainted products maybe the watch word should be "Trust but verify," and that is what inspection services are all about.

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