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## Imported food rarely inspected

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WASHINGTON --

Just 1.3 percent of imported fish, vegetables, fruit and other foods are inspected - yet those government inspections regularly reveal food unfit for human consumption.

Frozen catfish from China, beans from Belgium, jalapenos from Peru, blackberries from Guatemala, baked goods from Canada, India and the Philippines - the list of tainted food detained at the border by the Food and Drug Administration stretches on.

Add to that the contaminated Chinese wheat gluten that poisoned cats and dogs nationwide and led to a massive pet food recall, and you've got a real international pickle. Does the United States have the wherewithal to ensure the food it imports is safe?

Food safety experts say no.

With only a minuscule percentage of shipments inspected, they say the nation is vulnerable to harm from abroad, where rules and regulations governing food production are often more lax than they are at home.

"FDA doesn't have enough resources or control over this situation presently," said Mike Doyle, director of the University of Georgia's Center for Food Safety, which works with industry to improve safety.

Last month alone, FDA detained nearly 850 shipments of grains, fish, vegetables, nuts, spice, oils and other imported foods for issues ranging from filth to unsafe food coloring to contamination with pesticides to salmonella.

And that's with just 1.3 percent of the imports inspected. As for the other 98.7 percent, it's not inspected, much less detained, and goes to feed the nation's growing appetite for imported foods.

Each year, the average American eats about 260 pounds of imported foods, including processed, ready-to-eat products and single ingredients. Imports account for about 13 percent of the annual diet.

"Never before in history have we had the sort of system that we have now, meaning a globalization of the food supply," said Robert Brackett, director of the FDA's Center for Food Safety and Applied Nutrition.

FDA inspections focus on foods known to be at risk for contamination, including fish, shellfish, fruit and vegetables. Food from countries or producers previously shown to be problematic also are flagged for a closer look.

Consider this list of Chinese products detained by the FDA just in the last month: frozen catfish tainted with illegal veterinary drugs, fresh ginger polluted with pesticides, melon seeds contaminated with a cancer-causing toxin and filthy dried dates.

But even foods expected to be safe can harbor unexpected perils. Take wheat gluten: Grains and grain byproducts like it are rarely eaten raw and generally pose few health risks, since cooking kills bacteria and other pathogens.

Even so, the FDA can't say for sure whether the ingredient used in the pet foods was inspected after it arrived from China. And if the wheat gluten was, officials said, it wouldn't have been tested for melamine. Even though the chemical isn't allowed in food for pets or people, in any quantity, it previously wasn't believed toxic.

How did the melamine wind up in the wheat gluten? Investigators still don't know. Meanwhile, China is struggling to overhaul its food system and improve safety standards, but still faces major hurdles.

Farmers use pesticides and chemical fertilizers to build produce yields and antibiotics are used on seafood and livestock. Heavy metals also can be introduced into the food chain by widespread industrial pollution.

Increasingly, those foods are sold in a now global marketplace.

While the European Union, Canada and Mexico still top the list of food exporters to the U.S., China is coming up fast. Since 1997, the value of Chinese food imports, including commodities like wheat gluten, has more than tripled, to \$2.1 billion from \$644 million, according to Agriculture Department statistics. It accounts for 3.3 percent of the total food the U.S. buys abroad.

For suspect imported products - and wheat gluten is now one of them - the FDA issues alerts to its inspectors. The FDA flags Chinese food and other imported products it regulates, like cosmetics, for that extra scrutiny more than any other country except Mexico.

To safeguard its export business, China is looking at separating foods by their ultimate destination, domestic or foreign, according to Michiel Keyzer, director of the Center for World Food Studies at Amsterdam's Vrije Universiteit.

U.S. government statistics suggest China still has a way to go.

The FDA has been stopping Chinese food import shipments at the rate of about 200 per month this year. Shippers have the right to appeal the detentions, after which the government can order products returned or destroyed.

How do you know the origin of the food you eat? The 2002 Farm Act called for fish, fruit and vegetable imports to be labeled by country of origin, though implementation for the latter two foods has been delayed.

Meanwhile, the U.S. imports more and more, though the increase in value is partially due to the weaker dollar.

All told, the U.S. is expected to import a record \$70 billion in agricultural products for the 12 months ending in September, according to an Agriculture Department forecast. The value of those imports will be about double the nearly \$36 billion purchased overseas in 1997.

Contributing to that growth are the fresh fruits and vegetables imported during the offseason, when domestic production dwindles or ends.

About one-quarter of our fruit, both fresh and frozen, is imported. For tree nuts, it's about half. And for fish and shellfish, more than two-thirds come from overseas.

Even as the amount of imported food increased, the percentage of FDA inspections declined - from 1.8 percent in 2003 to 1.3 percent this year to an expected 1.1 percent next year.

"Inspections have a very important role but they're not the solution. They are the verification," FDA commissioner Dr. Andrew von Eschenbach said.

The FDA and the USDA have adopted a "risk-based" inspection philosophy, focusing on specific foods, sources or producers that they believe represent the largest potential risk to the public's health.

"The public at large is not at any increased risk," said Craig Henry, senior vice president and chief operating officer for scientific and regulatory affairs of the Grocery Manufacturers-Food Products Association, an industry group.

Caroline Smith DeWaal, director of food safety at the Center for Science in the Public Interest, an advocacy group, countered that "risk-based" is just shorthand for "reduced resources."

"Whenever they say 'risk-based approach,' it often means they don't have enough staff to actually do the job. They're doing triage. They're trying to hit what's most important to inspect but they're missing a lot," DeWaal said.

Groups lobbying to increase the FDA's budget say its spending on food safety has languished, despite the agency's outsized role in ensuring the safety of the nation's food supply.

A recent Government Accountability Office report noted that most of the \$1.7 billion the federal government allocates to food safety goes to the USDA, which is responsible for regulating about 20 percent of the food supply. The FDA, responsible for most of the other 80 percent, gets about 24 percent of the total spent on food safety.

Unlike the FDA, the USDA requires foreign inspection certificates to accompany all products it regulates, which include meat and poultry. Those imports are then reinspected at each port of entry before they are allowed into this country - something that doesn't happen to all FDA-regulated imports.

Under the Bioterrorism Act of 2002, anyone importing food into the United States is required to notify the FDA of the shipment before it arrives by land, air or sea. That allows the FDA to intercept contaminated products before they reach the marketplace, though agency officials acknowledge it doesn't always work that way.

"We have better control than we did a few years ago but it is largely the responsibility of the importer to make sure those products are safe," said Stephen Sundlof, the FDA's top veterinarian.

ChemNutra Inc., the Las Vegas importer of the tainted wheat gluten, said it was "particularly troubled" that its supplier did not disclose it contained melamine.

Doyle, of the University of Georgia, warned the contaminated pet food could be an unsavory taste of what's to come.

"This is not the first and will not be the last but it certainly is a wakeup call for the public to get a better appreciation for where this country is going with imports and imported foods," Doyle said.

Brackett, the FDA official, said the globalization of the food supply means the agency is going to have to be more creative and strategic in ensuring its safety. "I am not quite sure how we're going to do that yet," he said, "except to know that that's the direction that we're going to be heading."

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