

Systematic problems in the

Hardly a week goes by without some new food horror story from China. These food scares are driving world food officials to examine the problems with the Chinese food sector.

By Robert Vink

Even though tales of heavy metals in vegetables and poisonous dyes in eggs have been frequently in the Chinese press for the past few years, it wasn't until the pet deaths in North America that world attention was drawn to the problems with the Chinese food sector.

String of problems

While North American officials insist that it presents no real risk to humans, two food processors in China are suspected of adding the chemical melamine to vegetable proteins used in feed for pets, hogs, poultry, and fish.

However, the melamine scandal is just the most notorious in a long string of ongoing problems that China faces. They include overuse of highly toxic pesticides and fertilizers to boost yields, improper use of animal drugs, fraud and corruption. And as Western countries are finding out, China is exporting these problems abroad.

The negative publicity throughout the Western world is having an affect at different levels. A recent newspaper report from the US said that business at various Chinese restaurants was down due to consumers fearing the meat being used was from China.



Problems on the world stage

Also, the World Health Organization is looking at the safety of China's food system and potential recommendations on how to fix it. Much of its attention will focus on China's convoluted regulatory framework, loose laws and lack of monitoring.

"In a big country like China there are major challenges," says Dr. Henk Bekedam, the WHO's representative in China.

In his recent presentation, "Emerging Public Health Issue Emerging Public Health Issues and Threats, Improving Health Security – Invest in Health," Bekedam cites issues including the following:

- There are "plenty" of laws on food safety, but no overall law or unified standard.
- There are at least nine ministries involved in the issue, as well as other agencies, none of which has authority over the others. Co-ordination is lacking among the ministries.

- Suppliers are not properly certified in the food chain.
- The system isn't adequately monitored on a regular basis.

The last point speaks to the melamine scandal, Bekedam says. Since the product wasn't monitored during key points in its manufacture, it would be impossible to test for it in the end product "because you never thought" to test for it.

Recommendations from WHO will include a "farm to fork approach" with appropriate check at vulnerable points based on risk analysis and accreditation at every point of the food supply chain.

China treated the same

In spite of the various problems, some countries like Canada are not treating food from China any differently from that of any other country. Some food researchers wonder whether Canada should focus more heavily on individual countries exporting goods to Canada, instead of just the products themselves.

Chinese food industry



“We need to improve our ability to track food back to its source,” says Mansel Griffiths, director of the Canadian Research Institute for Food Safety at the University of Guelph. “This is all related to insuring a safer food supply.”

Primarily because of low costs, but also longer growing seasons, Canada has joined many other Western nations in relying increasingly on China for its food supply.

Food imports from China have exploded over the past decade, rising nearly 300 per cent to more than CAN\$705 million last year, according to Statistics Canada.

According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAOSTAT), in 2005, China exported 1.6 million tonnes of meat.

Officials focused only on the risk

The Canadian Food Inspection Agency says it has no issue with China, and that it ensures the safety of Canada’s food

supply by assessing the risk of each type of food, not the country from which it originates.

Paul Mayers, executive director of the agency’s animal products directorate says, “We focus on the risk of the product.” He adds, “Whether it’s eggs or protein concentrates, it doesn’t matter what country it comes from. A risk is a risk. The perspective we see in terms of food from China is that these products continue to be safe for consumers and continue to meet Canadian requirements.”

Mayers questions how one would compare one country to another in terms of food safety internationally as there is no benchmarking to suggest the food in one country is significantly riskier than food from another country.

China has most rejections

However, south of the border, the US Food and Drug Administration readily compiles data that suggests otherwise. Over the past year, the data shows that China has consistently had the most shipment rejections of any country. Last month, even though a mere 1 per cent of all shipments are inspected in the US, China had 257 rejections. The next highest were Mexico and India, with 140 and 122, respectively.

The rejections were for everything from unsafe use of colorants and additives, to antibiotics and banned drugs in meat and fish.

WHO official, Bekedam says that “if the percentage is far higher in China, of course then ... countries have to make it part of their assessment and see from what they’re going to do with it.”

EU has proactive approach

Rather than sitting back and reacting to potential problems, the EU is taking a preventative approach rather than an inspection approach and is trying to certify individual companies in China.

Traceability is a problem

China’s food safety record is dismal, experts say. Much of it stems from the farm system: still largely tiny-plot farmers – several hundred million of them – often using fake pesticides and fertilizers or barred animal drugs. Much of their crop or livestock is sold to traders and processors without documentation or records.

Even the government lacks an exact figure on the number of food and meat processors. There may be 1 million, across China’s 31 provinces, and most are small or midsize, and they lack education, and technical and legal knowledge. As one Chinese government official said, “It is impossible for inspectors to visit them all within a single year.”

Blame game

Chinese food officials are not standing still in the face of the storm of criticism. They warn it’s “buyer be ware.”

“Officials like me in the Chinese government can supervise the producers here, but US companies doing business with Chinese companies must also be very clear about the standards they need, and don’t just look for a cheap price,” says Yuan Changxiang, a deputy director in the ministry responsible for inspecting imports and exports.

Jin Zemin, general manager of Shanghai Kaijin Bio-Tech, which specializes in wheat gluten, agrees. US importers “want cheaper prices, but that can come at a cost,” he says. “You should know exactly where the products you buy are coming from. Don’t just look at the price.”

China seeks improvements

Bekedam emphasizes, however, that food safety is an issue worldwide. And that China is making improvements. “They do accept they need some further advice on how to improve food safety,” he says. China said it plans to revise rules related to food and drug safety and implement



Domestic food scandals in China have included improper use of animal drugs.

nationwide inspections, the New York Times recently reported.

China's State Council said it planned by 2010 to establish new controls on food exports. It also said it would maintain data on inspections of 90 percent of all food products. China's government also vowed safety checks on most food makers.

The goal five years from now, the Chinese government said, was that "100 percent of the significant food safety accidents are investigated and dealt with" and that "90 percent of the food that needs to be recalled is recalled." **MI**