

China not only worry on imported food

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MEXICO CITY --

Mexican cantaloupe irrigated with water from sewage-tainted rivers. Candy laced with lead. Chinese toothpaste is not the only concern for U.S. consumers wary of the health risks posed by imported goods.

Producers in other developing nations are big violators of basic food safety standards, even as they woo consumers with a growing appetite for foods like pickled mangoes from India and winter-season fruits and vegetables from Mexico.

On Wednesday, President Bush established a high-level government panel to recommend steps to guarantee the safety of food shipped into the U.S. and to improve policing of those imports.

"The administration is concerned about the safety of imported products that Americans eat and use," White House spokesman Tony Snow said.

China, already under suspicion as the source of tainted toothpaste, contaminated fish and toxic medicine, had the largest number of violations in the past 12 months, with the U.S. Food and Drug Administration rejecting 1,901 shipments of food or cosmetics. But India and Mexico weren't far behind, with inspectors rejecting 1,787 and 1,560 shipments, respectively.

The biggest reasons? Foods that are unapproved or contain poisons and pesticides. Some are simply dirty, with inspectors finding that the shipment "appears to consist in whole or in part of a filthy, putrid, or decomposed substance or be otherwise unfit for food."

And those are just the problems that are caught. FDA inspectors only have the money and resources to check about 1 percent of the 8.9 million imported food shipments a year. Many of those inspections target problem products from problem nations, like Indian relishes or Mexican cantaloupe.

The FDA banned all cantaloupe from Mexico in 2002 after four salmonella outbreaks traced to the fruit killed two people in the United States and hospitalized at least 18 others.

While some Mexican cantaloupe exporters have regained the FDA's trust by adopting cleaner irrigation methods, Mexican melons are often contaminated by sewage-laced water. In June alone, the FDA rejected six shipments of Mexican cantaloupe, 4 percent of the 139 total shipments from Mexico, because of salmonella.

Mexican green onions were blamed for a 2003 outbreak of hepatitis A in Pennsylvania that was traced to the Chi-Chi's restaurant chain. Four people died and more than 600 people were sickened.

And three Mexican candy manufacturers, including two subsidiaries of Mars Inc. and Hershey Co., agreed last year to lead testing and annual audits after The Orange County Register found that California state and federal regulators knew spicy Mexican candies could cause lead poisoning in children, but did nothing.

Candy makers are still major violators, making up at least 15 percent of the FDA's June rejections for Mexico after inspectors determined that shipments were filthy, unsafe or contained pesticides.

In the same month, FDA inspectors determined that four shipments of oral electrolyte solution - used to treat dehydration in children with acute diarrhea or vomiting - contained unsafe coloring and false labeling.

While the products carried the name of Abbott Laboratories of Mexico, a spokesman for the Chicago-based company, Kurt Ebenhoch, said the product was manufactured for sale in Mexico, but shipped by another company to the U.S.

"The product was never intended for sale in the U.S.," he said.

Still, food safety issues are relatively small amid the \$10.3 billion in food Mexico exported to the U.S. last year.

Suzanne Heinen, a U.S. Department of Agriculture official in Mexico City, said Mexico has come a long way in protecting its food exports, with close government oversight of the industry and large-scale producers who employ U.S. agricultural practices.

"They don't want to have a problem and lose that market," she said.

Developing nations also aren't the only food safety violators.

The U.S. spinach and green onion supply was called into question last year after two E. Coli outbreaks, both linked to the U.S.-based Ready Pac company. And U.S.-based ConAgra Foods Inc. launched a massive recall of Peter Pan peanut butter in February after more than 600 people reported salmonella poisoning.

Developing countries have their own food safety concerns.

Mexico questions the widespread U.S. use of genetically modified crops, and has banned them because of concerns they could be harmful. President Felipe Calderon, however, has said he will ease those restrictions.

Many nations, including South Korea, have rejected U.S. beef because of fears of mad cow disease.

Fears over Chinese products began last year after dozens of deaths in Panama blamed on medicine contaminated with diethylene glycol, a chemical used in anti-freeze that can cause kidney failure, paralysis and death. The same chemical has been found in Chinese toothpaste, although there have been no reports of resulting health problems.

China is instituting a daily food safety reporting system to try to win back consumer confidence, and it executed the head of the State Food and Drug Administration, Zheng Xiaoyu, for taking bribes and gifts in exchange for approval of untested, substandard and fake products.