

PolicyPennings by Dr. Daryll E. Ray

Were our pets canaries in the mineshaft of food ingredient imports?

With the news about the recent pet food recalls possibly due to an ingredient imported from China, we are beginning to wonder whether or not our household pets have inadvertently become the proverbial canary in the mineshaft of our food system. The recall began with a rash of cat and dog deaths due to kidney failure, the potential cause of which was traced to wet pet food manufactured in the US under a number of different labels.

Originally it was thought that the contaminant was a rat poison that found its way into the imported pet food ingredients. Later tests suggested that the contaminant was not a rat poison, but rather melamine—a material used to make plastic dinnerware but also can be used as a fertilizer.

As we write this column, scientists are still not sure of the mechanism by which the melamine caused the deaths. What is known is that while melamine was not thought to be toxic to animals, except in very large doses and over very long periods of time, it was not an approved additive for pet food ingredients.

While adding melamine to wheat gluten and rice protein is not a practice in the US, the Chicago Tribune reports that it has been a common practice in China for a number of years. It turns out that adding melamine to wheat gluten and rice protein increases the nitrogen level of the product. Rather than directly testing for protein levels, laboratories use tests for nitrogen as a proxy. The higher nitrogen test levels result in higher prices for the tainted feed ingredients.

Even worse, the Chicago Tribune reports, “The melamine-laced food reached hogs because surplus pet food—crumbled and broken food bits rejected as unsuitable for dogs and cats—was sent to hog farms and turned into feed.”

The tainted ingredients were not caught at the borders because with the growing volume of food and food ingredient imports, only 1 to 2 percent of these imports are inspected, let alone tested for foreign matter like melamine.

But the problem may not be confined to the borders. In recent years the food inspection role has increasingly been turned over to industry, in an attempt to streamline the process and make it more efficient.

A century ago the nation was scandalized by Upton Sinclair’s account of the meat packing industry in Chicago and the adulteration of the food products offered for sale in the marketplace. The result was the passage of the Pure Food and Drug Act.

With the death of so many family pets, and a widening set of problems like the possibility that tainted ingredients have entered the human food chain, we wonder if the public will once again want to reexamine our food system.

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