

Pending trade deals could worsen imported food safety problem

SEATTLE — Washington State Rep. Maralyn Chase (D-Shoreline) joined with Washington and Oregon food producers and consumer safety and trade advocates July 25 to release a new report documenting the connection between existing trade agreements and the growing threat posed by unsafe food imports — and how pending trade agreements would further undercut Congress' efforts to remedy the problem.

Food imports to the United States have doubled — to nearly \$65 billion annually — since implementation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the World Trade Organization (WTO) agreements. Projections for proposed free trade agree-

ments (FTAs) with Peru, Panama, South Korea and Colombia show an increase in food imports, while the deals would also replicate past trade pact limits on safety standards the United States can require for imported food and how much inspection is permitted.

According to the new report issued by Public Citizen, a public-interest watchdog organization based in Washington, D.C., trade rules incorporated into the proposed FTAs with Peru, Panama, Colombia and South Korea limit food safety standards and border inspection. The agreements require the United States to rely on foreign regulatory structures and foreign safety inspectors to ensure that food imports are

safe.

"This is a trade problem that is not just about China, but rather goes to a trade model that prioritizes increasing the volume of traded food over safety," said Lori Wallach, director of Public Citizen's Global Trade Watch division.

Data analyzed in the report show that many foreign regulatory systems are simply not up to the task.

Furthermore, the pacts require that U.S. food safety regulators treat imported food the same as domestically produced food, even though more intensive inspection of imported goods is needed to compensate for their weaker regulatory structures.

"Passage of the pending FTAs

would elevate, not lessen, the threat to the safety of the U.S. food supply," Wallach said. "The FTAs could have been an opportunity to create a new model for enhanced food safety in trade. Instead, the agreements, if implemented as written, may well generate the next spate of news reports about problems with food products from these countries."

Global Trade Watch says the vast majority of imported foods that end up on the dinner plates of U.S. consumers is unexamined and untested. It noted the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) will conduct border inspections on only 0.6 percent of imported vegetables, fruit, seafood, grains, dairy and animal feed in 2007. That is down from 8 percent prior to NAFTA.

Only 11 percent of imported beef, pork and chicken is inspected at the border by the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA).

Despite the limited inspections, FDA has caught numerous dangerous substances in imports from Peru, including illegal pesticide residues on fruits and vegetables, the parasite cryptosporidium in salad vegetables and basil, unknown and unapproved drugs and capsules (including unapproved shark cartilage capsules and cats claw capsules), Listeria in avocados, and unsafe color additives in chocolate bonbons and soft drinks. Similarly, the agency has caught dangerous products from Panama.

Wallach said FDA data makes clear that Americans are three times more likely to be exposed to dangerous pesticide residues on imported foods than on domestic foods.

And while the four prospective FTA countries' governments currently can challenge U.S. food standards that extend beyond trade pact constraints and limit trade using government-to-government WTO dispute tribunals, the proposed FTAs would newly empower the more than 10,000 food exporters currently registered in Peru, Panama, Colombia and South Korea to pursue challenges directly against U.S. food safety laws if they believe such laws undermine their FTA-granted foreign investor rights.

Already under NAFTA, Canadian

cattle producers have used such foreign investor private enforcement rights to demand \$235 million in compensation from the U.S. government over the U.S. temporary ban on Canadian beef imports when several Canadian cattle were initially found to be infected with mad cow disease.

The pending FTAs also establish new committees to speed up implementation of mechanisms to facilitate trade rules, including "equivalence determinations," which require the United States to permit imports of meat and poultry products that do not meet U.S. safety standards. Once so-called equivalence is achieved, products to be imported into a country must meet only the standards of the exporting country — not those of the importing country.

"It's obvious that when it comes to food trade rules, corporate profits are taking priority over adequate consumer safety," said Rick North, project director of the Campaign for Safe Food for the Oregon Physicians for Social Responsibility. "We need to be taking a proactive approach to deal with the food safety crisis, not passing more trade agreements that will allow businesses to undermine good state food safety laws."

State Rep. Chase, who has sponsored bills mandating food labeling requirements, said lawmakers have long recognized that international trade agreements contain rules "that undermine the democratic process in place to regulate in the public interest."

Chase said citizens have a right to know that the food on their table is safe to eat, and "it is unfathomable that we are considering trade agreements that allow other countries to challenge necessary domestic laws that can protect our families from dangerous foods."

Nyssa, Ore., farmer Owen Froerer said U.S. trade policies have run amok. "We are told that trade agreements are supposed to help us sell our product overseas. Well, a lot of farmers in the Pacific Northwest have found that just the opposite is true."

Froerer said that in 2005, Seneca closed the world's largest asparagus cannery in Dayton, Ore., and shipped its state-of-the-art equipment to Peru.

"A free-trade agreement with Peru will be the nail in the coffin," he said.

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