

China Urges U.S. Not to Punish All Food Exporters

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China has urged the United States not to take punitive action against this country's exporters of agricultural goods even though Chinese officials have determined that two Chinese companies intentionally contaminated American pet food ingredients with an industrial chemical.

The government said this week that it had shut the two companies and detained several of their officers for their roles in setting off one of the largest pet food recalls in United States history.

The announcement, which was released late Monday, on the Web site of the country's quality inspection watchdog, appeared just days after investigators from the federal Food and Drug Administration ended a two-week-long visit to China seeking to determine how an industrial chemical called melamine got mixed into pet food ingredients.

"We hope the American side will accurately and objectively deal with problems among individual companies and not take stringent measures against other Chinese companies producing the same type of products," the government statement read.

China also said it hoped the case would not lead to trade frictions.

A spokesman for the F.D.A. in Washington could not be reached for comment. On Tuesday, however, F.D.A. officials said during a news conference that American investigators had recently returned from China and were preparing a report on the trip. The official said it was unclear when such a report would be released.

The announcement was the clearest signal yet that China was working hard to repair the damage done by the pet food scandal and growing concerns about the quality of the country's agricultural exports.

In recent weeks, China has vowed to step up its own inspections of agricultural and food exports and prove that the country does not have a problem with melamine-tainted food or feed ingredients.

The General Administration of Quality Supervision, Inspection and Quarantine said in its statement this week and in a similar statement released a week earlier that recently completed nationwide inspections had not turned up any food or feed products containing melamine.

The government seems determined to paint the two Chinese companies blamed for exporting melamine-tainted wheat flour to the United States as rogue companies, or "special individual cases" in a largely well-managed export industry.

The government's announcement, however, seems quite at odds with local Chinese agricultural industry executives. In recent weeks, they have said in interviews that for years producers and feed makers have either used melamine in animal feed, sold it to animal and fish feed producers or knew of the sale and use of melamine in animal feed.

Interviews with animal feed producers, melamine makers and melamine and feed traders suggested that it was a widespread practice to mix melamine into feed to deceive buyers into thinking they were getting higher-protein meal.

Most of the people interviewed said they did not believe that the practice was illegal or that melamine was toxic in animals or humans; the melamine was simply filler, most of them said, a way of earning extra profits.

They did say, however, that it was also mixed secretly, otherwise buyers would know they were being cheated out of protein.

"Our clients who buy melamine scrap to make animal feed are mainly from Shandong Province," Qin Huaizhen, manager of the Gaocheng Shunkai Chemical Factory in Hebei Province, said two weeks ago. "They use melamine scrap to produce fish, chicken and other animal feed."

He went on to add: "Clients use it to boost the protein level."

In its announcement Monday, China said its investigation showed that the two Chinese companies named by American regulators as the exporters of tainted wheat flour — the Xuzhou Anying Biologic Technology Development Company and the Binzhou Futian Biology Technology Company — had both sought to artificially bolster the protein reading on the goods they had exported to the United States by adding melamine, a chemical used to make plastics and fertilizer. Because melamine is high in nitrogen, it is known to spike protein counts.

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