

The China scare

by The San Diego Union-Tribune

The dramatic increase in trade with China is producing a frightening downside - the poor quality and lack of standards and regulation of many Chinese-made products. It affects the health and safety of everyone, particularly children, and Americans are right to be alarmed.

The scare over Chinese-made products made big headlines earlier this year with the news that pet food made in China was contaminated with the industrial chemical melamine. That resulted in thousands of reports of cats and dogs being sickened or killed and triggered one of the largest pet food recalls in American history. But in just the past two months there has been this astonishing string of other developments:

- Toy eyeballs made in China were found to be filled with kerosene. Toy drums, toy bears and toy trains were found to contain lead paint. A wrist rattle for babies was found to be a choking hazard. All these products were recalled, including 1.5 million train sets. In fact, according to The New York Times, 24 kinds of toys have been recalled for safety reasons in the United States so far this year; every one of them was made in China. - The federal government has ordered a recall of up to 450,000 possibly defective Chinese-made tires for minivans and light trucks. The tires were linked to at least one accident that left two people dead and a third with brain injury.

- The Food and Drug Administration advised consumers to throw out all brands of toothpaste made in China after discovering 900,000 tubes containing diethylene glycol, a poison used in some antifreeze products, had been distributed to public hospitals, prisons and juvenile detention centers in several states.

- The FDA placed a conditional ban on five types of farm-raised seafood from China that were possibly contaminated with unapproved and potentially unsafe drugs and food additives. The government said it took the action after years of warnings to the Chinese produced no action.

The rapid rise in imports from China has been astounding. Up to 80 percent of all toys sold in the United States are reportedly manufactured in China. Some 22 percent of seafood imports come from China.

Problems with the quality of Chinese-made products have risen, too. The Times report said 60 percent of all product recalls in this country involve Chinese-made goods, compared with 36 percent in 2000.

Last week, Chinese regulators announced they had launched a nationwide crackdown, uncovering 23,000 food-safety violations and closing 180 food plants.

That's welcome news, but not exactly reassuring and hardly sufficient. If China wants to retain the confidence of the American marketplace, it must produce to the high level of quality that Americans expect. To do that, it must eliminate the corruption rampant throughout the Chinese manufacturing sector. And it must vastly improve standards and oversight.

But the responsibility is not China's alone. American companies with plants or operations in China must do more to assure the quality of the products they make. And Congress and the president must make sure that regulatory agencies such as the FDA and the Consumer Product Safety Commission, now badly underfunded, have the resources they need to protect the health and safety of American consumers.

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