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Safety Alert on U.S. Feed Export Turns the Tables

After Scrutiny of China,
 Food-Supply Issue
 Grows More Complex

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The U.S. Food and Drug Administration has alerted health officials in more than a dozen countries about U.S.-made shrimp-feed products that could be contaminated with small amounts of a potentially dangerous chemical, a turnabout likely to complicate the debate over the safety and export of food.

The chemical, melamine, is used in plastics and fire retardants, but it isn't allowed to be added to food in the U.S. or in China. It is the same chemical that has been linked to the deaths of a number of cats and dogs in the U.S.

FOCUS ON FOOD

- **Reaching Out:** U.S. officials warned 13 countries about U.S. shrimp-feed products containing small amounts of a potentially hazardous chemical.
- **Rules Questioned:** The move comes amid scrutiny of China's food exports to the U.S. and elsewhere.
- **More Unknowns:** The situation's uncertainties highlight the difficulty of monitoring food supplies.

It is unclear whether the shrimp-feed products exported to the 13 countries warned actually reached their destinations or entered markets there. It is also unclear how widely available the products are in the U.S., though its U.S. manufacturer issued a nationwide voluntary recall last week.

Based on information from the U.S. company and its suppliers, the FDA estimates the products carry only small amounts of melamine that are unlikely to pose a risk to human health.

Still, the uncertainties underscore the complexities inherent in monitoring a vast and diffuse food supply.

The alert also shows how, while China has been facing criticism over the safety of its food exports and how closely they are regulated, the U.S. is coming under similar scrutiny. In a May 30 announcement related to this latest alert, the FDA said that some animal-feed ingredients made in the U.S. were tainted with melamine, and that some of the recalled feed products could have been exported.

Lawmakers have been pushing to examine foods imported from China and elsewhere, and have grilled U.S. health officials on their efforts to protect the national food supply. In March, the FDA said it had found that melamine-tainted wheat flour shipped from China ended up in U.S. pet foods, leading to the recall of more than 60 million cans of tainted food. Early last month, the FDA created the position of a food-safety czar, naming David Acheson its assistant commissioner for food protection.

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Michael Herndon, a spokesman for the FDA in Washington, said yesterday that the melamine-contaminated products made in the U.S., including feed ingredients and shrimp feed, may have been exported by Zeigler Bros. Inc., a feed manufacturer in Gardners, Penn. The countries are Panama, Venezuela, Belize, Suriname, Costa Rica, Honduras, Ecuador, Brazil, the Dominican Republic, Jamaica, Gambia, Lebanon and Canada.

According to the FDA, human consumption of animals given the contaminated feed is very unlikely to pose a human health risk.

A spokeswoman for Zeigler, Cayce Jones, said in a statement that the company is "cooperating fully" with the FDA. Ms. Jones did not respond to specific questions about the products. "Our company is under a tremendous amount of stress -- we have had a recent fire that destroyed one of our manufacturing facilities," she said. "We are currently busy working with our customers."

The day after the FDA said melamine-tainted feed ingredients had been made in the U.S., Zeigler issued a nation-wide recall of some of its products. Zeigler added that it was "not aware of any instances of ill health effects in shrimp" that were fed the products.

The source of the melamine in Zeigler's feed is a binding agent prepared by another U.S. company, Uniscope Inc., of Johnstown, Colo. Uniscope works with several distributors in the U.S. and more than a dozen international distributors, according to its Web site. Uniscope had been using a resin in its binders that contained the melamine, which was added by Tembec BTLRS Inc. of Toledo, Ohio, to improve the products' "binding properties," according to the FDA. Tembec is the only U.S. company that has said it added melamine to its animal-feed ingredients. A spokesman for Uniscope, Charles Russell, said the company had been unaware of the contamination until it tested the resin it received from Tembec. Tembec BTLRS is a subsidiary of **Tembec Inc.**, a forest-products company based in Montreal that manufactures newsprint and chemicals, among other products. John Valley, an executive vice president for the parent company, said in a recent interview that his company had been using melamine since 2004 but stopped doing so after news about the tainted pet food came out this spring.

Yesterday, Mr. Valley said melamine allowed the binder "to achieve satisfactory performance specifications." Mr. Valley said he needed to consult with the company's technical experts before elaborating on exactly what performance specifications are achieved. He declined to answer further questions. However, melamine is known to provide certain characteristics in resins, like the ability to withstand heat, weight or moisture.

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