

Honey Laundering

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A five month investigation by the Seattle Post-Intelligencer into "honey laundering", the intentional mislabeling of the country of origin, found that tons of Chinese honey coming into the U.S. is tainted with banned antibiotics.

"It doesn't take a wizard to determine whether there are bad things in the honey we handle, nor a hero to do what it takes to keep it from our food supply," said Mark Brady, a Texas beekeeper who sits on the National Honey Board. "If we buy Chinese honey, as we do far too often, we know it may contain chloramphenicol or some other antibiotic that is illegal in any food product," said Brady, who produces about a million pounds of honey a year. "To find it and not report it is criminal."



Two-thirds of the honey Americans consume is imported and almost half of that, regardless of what's on the label, comes from China, the Seattle P-I reported last month.

But when the contamination is discovered by the industry through internal testing, insiders say, federal health or customs officials are almost never notified, and the honey ends up being dumped back on the market. That practice is wrong, said Kenneth Haff, the newly elected president of American Honey Producers.

"We don't want to risk this tainted honey ever getting packed and distributed for human consumption," said Haff, who believes the industry could solve the problem if companies simply alert the Food and Drug Administration each time they discover a tainted shipment.

Instead, some major packers simply return bad honey to the importer, naively trusting them to destroy the shipment and not seek another buyer.

Said Haff: "We run the risk of the importer trying to resell this same adulterated honey for a cheaper price somewhere else."

That happens all too often. Court documents from last year's arrests of two Chicago-based executives with Alfred L. Wolff, a German food distributor, reveal how rampant the sale and resale of bad honey is.

Testimony from federal investigators and informants offer a glimpse into a typical deal: Wolff sold Chinese honey to a U.S. honey producer. The packer tested the shipment and found traces of antibiotics. Wolff took the honey back and resold it to another packer who didn't test for contaminants.

If convicted, the Wolff executives face up to five years in prison for conspiring to falsify country of origin on the Chinese shipments.

In its series, the P-I reported that it had received shipping papers showing that Chinese honey, falsely labeled as a product of India, was sold to several U.S. honey packers, including one of the nation's largest, Sue Bee Honey Association.

Sue Bee Vice President Bill Huser said 315 different beekeepers supply 60 percent of the 40 million pounds of honey the Iowa-based company sells each year. The rest is imported. To protect consumers, Huser said, the company does extensive and elaborate testing on the imported honey, finding shipments laced with chloramphenicol, an illegal antibiotic, about once a month. When it's found, he said, it's sent back to the broker who imported it.

Bill Allibone, Sue Bee's president, said the company has no intention of telling government regulators about the bad honey it finds. It's not really Sue Bee's honey, he said, "because technically, it's still (the importer's) property until we pay for it. "We have not notified the FDA in the past because we don't have title to that property," Allibone said.

Medical experts agree that the presence of contaminants in honey is a health concern. A small number of people can be sickened or killed by eating even trace amounts of the banned antibiotics, the FDA says in its import alerts on the Chinese honey.

Does the National Honey Board serve as a watchdog for tainted honey? Bruce Boynton, the chief executive of the board, a trade group created by the U.S. Agriculture Department, said policing honey is the FDA's job. "It's not something we do," he said. "We have no knowledge about any bad honey out there. That's not our job, and we never get reports of problems."

But in 2006, he sent an e-mail to Honey Board members, warning

that tainted honey had been found in stores. In his warning, Boynton wrote that the industry had tested samples taken from products on supermarket shelves and found illegal levels of antibiotics. "Two samples tested positive for ciprofloxacin at the level of 14.07 (parts per billion) and 5.61 ppb," Boynton wrote.

In a recent interview, Boynton initially denied any knowledge of the warning. He stressed that the board is "not a regulatory agency" and has no obligation to notify health agencies of potential hazards.

Sonia Jimenez, who monitors the actions of the honey board for USDA's Agricultural Marketing Service, first told the P-I that the board "would have no way to know about contaminated honey," but when told of the CEO's e-mail, she said further comments would have to come from the agency's press office, which did not respond.

It is in the interest of the honey industry to assure that adulterated honey doesn't get into the marketplace to compete with the legitimate products made by honest producers," said Martin Stutsman, who heads most of FDA's efforts at policing adulterated food. "We encourage industry, upon discovering that a food is adulterated, to let the local FDA

office know about the particulars," he said. "That benefits the honest industry generally and also helps FDA in its enforcement activities to protect the public."

Eric Olson is one of several Washington state beekeepers who say they're concerned. "There are worrisome things happening all the time," said Olson, who runs an apiary in Yakima. "Truck drivers tell us about bringing full semi loads of foreign honey across the border to packers in our state and Oregon. That honey didn't come from



Canadian bees, but it's sold with a label saying 'from U.S. and Canadian honey'. We've screamed our heads off for so long, so that's kind of a dead subject. We just gave up."

Avoiding Tainted Products

NewsJournal Commentary

Now that you know that honey may be simply mislabeled or worse, adulterated, what is the right course of action to protect your health and avoid unnecessary risks?

An Import Problem? Tainted products are not simply an import problem. As the California E.coli outbreak and recent salmonella outbreak tied to peanuts processed in Texas prove, even domestic products can contain contaminants.

Buy Local: One way to reduce your risk to is try and locally source your food. Whether a co-op, farmer's market, or health food store that promotes locally grown food, you'll benefit in many ways.

The reduced transportation time and distance means you'll be purchasing fresher food, with less nutrient loss. You'll also help to reduce the environmental impact associated with transporting foods long distances.

Buy Certified Organic: This means the item has been grown according to strict uniform standards that are verified by independent state or private organizations. Certification includes inspections of farm fields and processing facilities, detailed record keeping, and periodic testing of soil and water to ensure that growers and handlers are meeting the standards which have been set.