

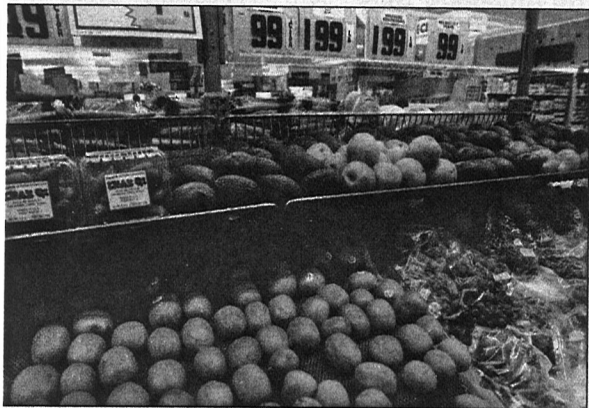
OPINION

## Private inspections of produce can help alleviate the United States' overburdened border control

BY AARON KRAUSS

News articles describing contaminants in imported food have led to an outcry for increased inspections of imported food products and demands that the government secure the borders against tainted food. While such demands are always popular — after all, people outside the borders do not vote for the officials in charge of making border policies — are they practical?

The U.S. Department of Agriculture said the United States imported \$70 billion worth of agricultural products in 2007. These imports are driven both by economic demand for cheaper food and by consumers' demand for a consistent supply of food. Years ago, no one would have been surprised or raised a fuss if a supermarket did not stock table grapes in January, blueber-



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CONGRESSIONAL QUARTERLY/DOUGLAS GRAHAM

ries in March, strawberries in August or peaches in November. Today, a supermarket that does not stock all of those fruits year-round is likely to receive numerous complaints from dissatisfied customers.

More importantly, those customers are likely to go down the street to another supermarket that does carry all of those fruits. The only way to address this consumer demand is to import food from countries whose climate is conducive to growing what will not grow in the United States year-round. Imports of food that cannot be grown domestically throughout the year account for about a quarter of all food imported into the United States.

The Food and Drug Administration is in charge of inspecting imported food. Currently, about 1 percent of imports are inspected. Ignoring budgetary constraints, inspections of imported food often are limited by the perishable nature of the food itself. Unlike a container of consumer elec-

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tronics, a container of oranges simply cannot wait until an inspector is available. The perishable nature of many food imports makes them especially vulnerable to back-ups — potentially caused by increased inspections of other goods — at the border.

Calls for increased inspections also should be tempered by the fact that the United States exports more food than it imports. Indeed, exports have been the fastest-growing segment of the domestic food industry since the 1970s. To the point the United States increases inspections where they become financially or logistically onerous, one must expect that other nations will reciprocate in kind.

Even if inspections could be increased substantially without busting the budget or unduly disrupting the supply chain, they are not a panacea. For example, what should inspectors look for? It's not practical to test for every possible contaminant. Similarly, there are no commercially practical tests for some potential contaminants. What, then, can be done to reduce the risk of contaminants that are not readily subject to testing?

Domestically, the food industry has addressed the problem of the inability to test food for all possible contaminants by taking preventative measures and by hiring third-party auditors to check whether those measures actually are being taken. The American Institute of Baking inspects facilities and determines whether they are complying with dozens of safety standards. AIB then issues an overall rating, which can be compared with the ratings received by other suppliers. A supplier with perennially low ratings, or a supplier who refuses requests for inspections, is likely to find customers few and far between.

This same approach could be useful overseas. While the FDA cannot inspect overseas facilities in the same way it can inspect domestic facilities, there are no barriers to private companies conducting inspections overseas. Such inspections could serve as a proxy for FDA inspection. More importantly, private inspections can assist the FDA in focusing its inspections on imports with a higher risk.

For example, imports from suppliers who have been inspected by recognized private organizations might be subject to fewer, or less rigorous, inspections at the border. Conversely, imports from suppliers who have not been inspected by private services — or who have been inspected by private services that are not thought to be independent or of a high quality — might

be subject to more or tougher inspections.

The FDA's ability to disregard or discount inspections by private organizations that may have been co-opted or corrupted by unethical suppliers gives all private-inspection organizations an incentive to do their jobs well. To the extent they do not, the suppliers paying them for their services will not reap a benefit. The result would be to drive disreputable private inspectors out of business.

The FDA already is considering shifting to a risk-based system to focus its inspections. The FDA's proposal would require the agency to collect data on how foods being imported had been produced and handled, and to analyze that data in order to decide whether a particular shipment should be inspected. Private inspections could simplify the FDA's analysis, and provide a package of information to inspectors. Private inspections also would address the FDA's stated goal of attempting to put a greater focus on preventing problems as opposed to discovering problems after they have arisen. Inside the United States, the FDA can achieve this goal through various initiatives, such as its recently announced tomato safety initiative, which the FDA modeled on its 2006 leafy greens safety initiative.

The FDA also can supply the domestic industry with tools, such as its CARVER + Shock Software Tool to assist the industry in quantifying the risks it faces. Since the FDA cannot mandate that suppliers in other countries comply with its policies or participate in its initiatives, the private sector must fill the gap.

Even if the government formulates a new food inspection policy, there are many ways food industry companies can protect themselves from tainted imports. Most of them come down to the ancient practice of caveat emptor, or buyer beware. More and more companies are demanding assurances from their vendors that they are using best practices, such as HACCP, Good Manufacturing Practices, and Good Agricultural Practices.

Some companies are going further and demanding assurances further up the supply chain. Proctor & Gamble, for example, is no longer permitting P&G's suppliers to obtain raw ingredients from sources that have not been inspected by P&G. While inspecting your own suppliers might at first seem excessive, the costs of an undetected problem anywhere in the supply chain can be severe. ■

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