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Taiwan

Poultry and Products

Dioxin Identified in Duck Eggs

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Report Highlights:

Earlier this year, duck eggs produced in the Changhua township of Hsienhsi were found to have high levels of dioxin. The Council of Agriculture, Department of Health, and the Environmental Protection Administration destroyed 20,853 ducks and 1.27 million duck eggs before making a formal announcement, in mid June, of the contamination and its successful control. The immediate impact on production and sales of duck eggs was minimal and no specific long-term impacts are anticipated. This latest incident of food contamination in Taiwan by industrial pollutants underscores the problem of managing modern agricultural production in an environment severely compromised by decades of industrial growth and lax environmental regulations.

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Summary

Earlier this year, duck eggs produced in the Changhua township of Hsienhsi were found to have high levels of dioxin. The Council of Agriculture, Department of Health, and the Environmental Protection Administration destroyed 20,853 ducks and 1.27 million duck eggs before making a formal announcement, in mid June, of the contamination and its successful control. The immediate impact on production and sales of duck eggs was minimal and no specific long-term impacts are anticipated. However, this latest incident of food contamination in Taiwan by industrial pollutants underscores the problem of managing modern agricultural production in an environment severely compromised by decades of industrial growth and lax environmental regulations.

Background

Little of the relatively level land adjacent to Taiwan's western coast, on which is located much of the island's agriculture and animal husbandry industries (as well as population), remains untouched by three decades of industrial development. While factories set next to fields of paddy rice and vegetable gardens remain a common sight, it is the dangers not immediately visible that deserve the most attention in terms of food safety and cause the most concern for regulators and policymakers. Long-term contamination of soil and groundwater, undocumented waste dumps, and illicit releases of industrial effluents into the atmosphere remain perennial problems. While Taiwan's Council of Agriculture, Department of Health and Environmental Protection Administration are making headway to control and clean up the most visible problems, there remains much yet to do.

University researchers identified early in 2005 high concentrations of dioxin in a popular processed duck egg product ("1,000-year eggs") sold at retail outlets in Taiwan. In response to this news, the Council of Agriculture (COA), coordinating with the Department of Health and Environmental Protection Administration, traced the contamination back to farms in the Changhua County township of Hsienhsi. The area of contamination is in close proximity to the Chiang-Pin Industrial Park.

While authorities admit levels of dioxin found in the 1,000-year egg products were high (compared with EU standards noting concern above the 0.4 picogram (pg) per gram level), a research report on the issue, which will include study results on actual dioxin levels found in Hsienhsi duck eggs, has yet to be completed and released.

In order, according to COA officials, to sidestep a market overreaction to what was identified as a geographically limited instance of contamination, Taiwan authorities proceeded to slaughter ducks raised on farms in the contaminated area without formally notifying the public.

According to the COA, 20,853 head of duck were culled and 1.27 million eggs were destroyed / recalled in order to prevent the further release of dioxin-contaminated eggs into the market. In a statement released by the Council of Agriculture on June 10th, their efforts were successful.

Market Impact

While it is too early to determine the overall market impact of this most recent food contamination issue, retail contacts indicate that sales of fresh eggs, 1,000-year eggs and

poultry meat have remained comparable to the norms expected for the summer season. Retailers attribute this to the limited nature of the reported contamination problem, the light overall media attention given to the issue, and the delay by some 4 months between the discovery of contamination and the COA public announcement of the problem (and, concurrently, its resolution).

In terms of production, the reported number of eggs destroyed / removed from wholesale and retail channels (1.27 million) represent 0.3% of annual duck egg production and around 0.4% of annual 1,000-year egg production.

Taiwan imports no duck eggs (and no significant quantity of any poultry eggs) from the United States or other countries. The minimal exports of processed duck eggs that Taiwan exports (mostly to overseas ethnically-Chinese markets) may see some negative impact from this contamination incident.

Conclusions

Industrial pollutants in the food supply chain represent an increasingly recognized and admitted problem in Taiwan. Because of largely unrestrained development policies practiced in previous decades, Taiwan authorities have only just begun to discover and address latent pollution issues.

While this latest discovery of contamination in the food chain has not resulted in significant changes in consumption patterns or disruptions in the demand for / supply of duck eggs, it is another in an already lengthy record of problems with local food supplies. Such revelations can only underscore consumer questions about the safety of locally produced food and can, in turn, lead to increasing consumer interest in identifying and purchasing foods from sources (both domestic and overseas) deemed to have credible control over factors affecting production quality. As such, in marketing foods grown and processed in the United States, suppliers and food associations are advised, when appropriate, to address how growing and processing conditions help ensure and enhance food quality and safety.