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THE WORLD

In Fear and Scandal, Some Find a New Drum to Beat

By ANDREW MARTIN

THERE was a time the words “Made in China” immediately evoked “shoddy.” Lately, many Americans are thinking “danger.”

After reports of toothpaste laced with poison, tires that fall apart on the highway, contaminated fish and pet food, who wouldn’t be scared?

But for some people, those fears are a dream come true. Politicians, catfish farmers, consumer activists, to name a few.

For years, these groups have been trying to raise alarms about the wholesomeness of products from China as they pursue their own causes. Now, they revel in the chance to give China a few choice shots.

Southern catfish and shrimp farmers, for example, have invoked images of Asian ponds bubbling with antibiotics and pollutants but have gotten little notice from government regulators.

“We’ve been seeing prohibited chemicals and other additives in fish for quite a long time,” said Dick Stevens, chief executive of Consolidated Catfish in Mississippi. “We’ve just kind of gotten a blank look when we’ve said that to the agencies.”

Ranchers in the Great Plains, and the politicians who represent them, have been campaigning to require country-of-origin labeling on agricultural products, on the theory that “U.S.A.” gives them an edge. In 2002, a law was passed that required such labeling on most agricultural products, but the meat and grocery industries successfully campaigned to keep it from going into effect, except for seafood. Now China has unwittingly given their cause a boost.

“I think you see in this Chinese scandal that there are real risks to people, to pets, from problems in the food supply,” said Senator Kent Conrad, a Democrat from North Dakota. “People believe they have a right to know where their food is from.”

William Marler, a Seattle lawyer, says the reports of contaminated food from China have opened all sorts of opportunities. He specializes in representing clients who have gotten sick from eating tainted food. His most recent case was filed against the manufacturer of a product called “Veggie Booty,” a snack popular with children. In some bags, the “veggie” seasoning — made in China — was contaminated with salmonella, which sickened at least 57 people.

“My guess is that with increased globalization, and the billions of dollars at play, and with the denial of the

Chinese that there even is a problem, I had better brush up on my Chinese,” Mr. Marler wrote on his blog.

On Capitol Hill, China’s problems have also prompted I-told-you-so’s from consumer advocates and members of Congress who objected to China’s inclusion in the [World Trade Organization](#) in the late 1990s. Most of the objections at the time concerned human rights, labor and the environment. Now the question is safety.

“We have very strict food and drug standards that we enforce,” said Representative Marcy Kaptur, Democrat of Ohio, who opposed China’s admission to the World Trade Organization. “Importers are always trying to chip away at the edges of that safety net.”

The long-term impact of the scandals, of course, will depend on how many more defective products surface and, as grim as it sounds, whether any more people or pets are hurt, sickened or killed. Still, here’s a reasonable guess: a request by the Chinese to ship cooked chicken into the United States, which the Department of Agriculture is considering, will be shelved.

Meanwhile, other groups also stand to benefit. Members of Congress who have been calling for stricter standards for the nation’s food-safety system now have another example of what can go wrong when oversight fails. And protectionists have another argument against free-trade agreements.

But the underlying reality is that Chinese imports are going to continue growing in this country. They are simply too cheap and ubiquitous to resist.

Sara Bongiorno knows this now. She decided that her family would try to live an entire year without using products that were made in China, and her findings are detailed in a new book, “A Year Without ‘Made in China’: One Family’s True Life Adventure in the Global Economy.”

“There’s no way you can live anywhere near a normal life without buying things from China,” Ms. Bongiorno says. She notes, for example, that nearly all telephones and cellular phones are made there.

A bit sheepishly, she admits that she, too, has benefited from the recent scandals. Her book was released a week and a half ago, as the reports were piling up.

“I feel weird when people say, ‘Great timing!’ ” she said. “I think, ‘These are all kind of bad things.’ ”

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