

## Taiwan food scandals prompt new, stricter laws

After at least five cooking-oil scandals in November 2013 alone, Taiwan's authorities appeared to have had enough. In mid-December, Kao Cheng-li, head of Chang Chi Foodstuff Factory, was found guilty of 22 violations, including using an illegal colouring agent (copper chlorophyllin) in his company's products, and was fined a record NT\$78.6 million (\$2.85 million).

"The defendant had cheated consumers and reaped huge benefits by adulterating cooking oil products," the central Changhua District Court stated after handing down a 16-year prison sentence to Kao, the harshest term in three years of food scandals in Taiwan.

In 2011, government investigators found that half a million soft drinks contained di(2-ethylhexyl) phthalate (DEHP), a plasticizer commonly used to make polyvinyl chloride (PVC) products like rubber gloves. In late 2013, a series of almost weekly scandals (illegal additives found in rice, milk and alcoholic drinks) prompted a queue of company executives to issue public apologies. In response, countries including the United States, Singapore and China pulled hundreds of thousands of Taiwanese food items and drinks from supermarket shelves.

Outrage among consumers in this island nation finally prompted the government to act in January. After weeks of heated debate, Taiwan's National Assembly made major revisions to the Act Governing Food Sanitation. The revised act came into effect Feb. 5.

The Ministry of Health and Welfare must now set up a compensation fund for those exposed to tainted foods. In addition, importers of genetically modified products will have to establish a traceability system and firms will be obliged to send products to be tested for banned additives. Previously, traceability

tests on food additives were voluntary in Taiwan.

Companies found to have violated the act face fines up to \$1.8 million for products that could harm health, \$145 000 for mislabelling items and a maximum prison term of five years per violation.



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**Taiwan's new laws mean companies must send products to be tested for banned additives, and fines for violations range as high as \$1.8 million plus a prison term of up to five years per violation.**

The new law "imposes comprehensively stricter penalties on noncomplaint businesses," said a spokesperson of the Taiwan Food and Drug Administration.

Consumer groups say Taiwan's lawmakers could have gone further, however. The National Assembly did debate revisions that would have made Taiwan among the strictest countries in the world when it comes to food labelling, but this led to an outcry from international companies.

"One [aspect of the law] would have required food products to list every ingredient, including each type of flavouring on the label," says Don Shapiro, senior director of the American Chamber of Commerce in Taipei, which was against stricter measures. "Another would have required the label to include the name and address of the company in whose plant the product was produced, even if it is an [original equipment] manufacturer outsourced by the brand."

The Coca-Cola Company was in talks in January, with the government arguing that it would be forced to reveal its "secret recipe" under the proposed changes. Coca-Cola's regional office in Singapore did not respond to emails requesting details of its discussions with the Taiwanese government.

A further 22 food-related industry associations in Taiwan lobbied for less stringent regulations. Following intervention by the executive, the National Assembly eventually passed a watered down version of the new law on Jan. 28.

Coca-Cola will now have to list caffeine separately whereas previously it was only required to be named as a "flavouring agent," but — similar to other countries — it will not be required to name additives in Coke, Diet Coke and Coke Zero. All manufacturers in Taiwan will be required to list ingredients individually, as a percentage of the product.

Sheu Hui-yu, director of nutrition at the John Tung Foundation, a public health group based in Taipei, was among those lobbying for stricter regulations. He says the new law means Taiwan has finally caught up with the UN Food and Agriculture Organization's international standards on food safety, the Codex Alimentarius, which was drawn up in the 1960s.

But Taiwan missed an opportunity to go further in forcing food and beverage manufacturers to be more transparent about what goes into products and about their health impact on the country's 23 million people, says Sheu. "It is the consumer's basic right to know about the food they purchase and eat," he says. "We regret that diet and nutrition education was not able to be included in the amendments." — Steve Finch, Taipei, Taiwan

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