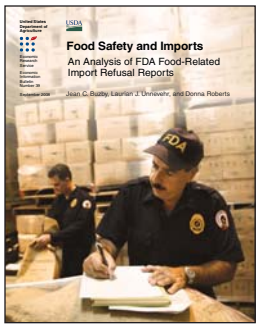
ERS Report Summary

Economic Research Service | September 2008 | U.S. Department of Agriculture



This is a summary of an ERS report.

Find the full report at ***www.ers.usda.gov/publications/eib39***

Food Safety and Imports: An Analysis of FDA Food-Related Import Refusal Reports

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Interest in the safety of imported foods has increased over time, not only because the volume of food imports is increasing in the United States, but because the imported share of the total U.S. food consumption is also rising, particularly for perishable, minimally processed foods. Food safety concerns about food imports may have far-reaching implications—reducing demand for certain imported products, altering international food trade patterns, and limiting access to U.S. markets for some foreign exporters.

What Is the Issue?

Data limitations constrain what is known about the safety of imported foods. As a first step to understanding this issue better, ERS researchers analyzed U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) refusals of food import shipments for 1998-2004 by food industry group and by type of violation. Here, the term *violations* refers to products that appear to violate one or more of the laws enforced by FDA, such as those dealing with adulterated or misbranded products.

What Did the Study Find?

The study revealed recurring food safety risks and other problems (e.g., inadequate labeling) in certain types of imported foods. The findings, however, do not indicate the actual level or distribution of food safety risk that imports may pose to American consumers because FDA's process for selecting shipments for inspection or other administrative actions is not random. Instead, FDA relies on risk-based criteria to guide its actions, including data on products and manufacturers with a history of violating U.S. import regulations. In essence, import refusals highlight food safety problems that appear to recur in trade and where the FDA has focused its import alerts and monitoring efforts.

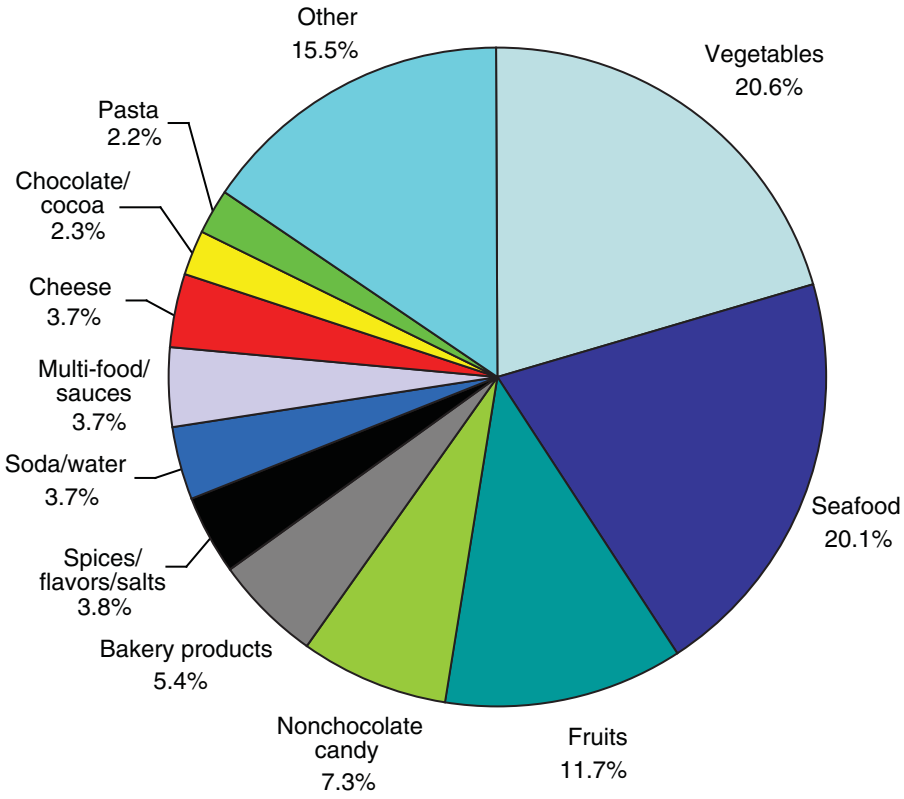
The top imported food categories refused due to food safety and other violations under FDA law were:

1. Vegetables and vegetable products (accounting for 20.6 percent of total violations);
2. Fishery and seafood products (20.1 percent); and
3. Fruits and fruit products (11.7 percent).

An examination of violations in these three categories reveals that refusals for sanitary violations in seafood and fruit products, pesticide violations in vegetables, and unregistered processes for canned food products in all three categories were persistent over time (fig. 1).

Of the 70,369 violations reported from 1998 to 2004, 33 percent were for *misbranding* or the lack of appropriate labeling and 65 percent were for *adulteration* or safety and packaging integrity problems (e.g., leaky containers/swollen cans may suggest the presence of microbial growth). Adulteration violations pose a wide range of food safety risks, from less severe risks, such as an insect in cooked soup, to immediate risks to human health, like botulism in canned food. The data indicate that the most common adulteration violations were for the appearance of filth in a food product and for failure to file information or register a specified process. When specific pathogens were identified in import refusals, they tended to be found in food products typically associated with such risks (e.g., *Listeria* in cheese and cheese products).

Figure 1
FDA import violations by food industry, 1998-2004



Source: ERS calculations using FDA Food-Related Import Refusal Reports, 1998-2004.

How Was the Study Conducted?

Researchers analyzed FDA Import Refusal Reports (IRR) for food shipments refused entry into U.S. commerce between 1998 and 2004. Tabulations were created of refusals by industry group and FDA violation code (e.g., type of violation). Adulteration violations were examined closely, particularly those linked to pathogen contamination.