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Back to Canada triggers food fight

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U.S. federal authorities are moving quickly to crack down on food fraud, and they're using Canadian technology to do it.

With reports mounting of regular cow's cheese being sold as more expensive and exotic “sheep's cheese” in Manhattan shops, or Mississippi paddlefish passed off as “sturgeon caviar,” the Food and Drug Administration has been under pressure to take action.

So the FDA called the University of Guelph, which has come up with a world-leading technology use DNA testing to sort out such frauds.

“We're the ones writing the protocols for the FDA,” says Robert Hanner, a professor at the University of Guelph.

Hanner is the global campaign coordinator of the school's Barcode of Life project, which is working to genetically identify all the varieties of fish in the world. The resulting database can then be used to identify the types of fish sold to consumers.

University of Guelph professor Robert Hanner, head of the school's Barcode of Life technology, is working with U.S. authorities to help set up a monitoring program for food fraud.

Susan Sampson/Toronto Star

“You want to read the label if you have allergies or health concerns,” he says.

Hanner worries, however, that his lab’s technology could one day be used against Canadian food exporters, who may unwittingly include fraudulent ingredients in their products.

“Bar coding, which is developed in Canada, is going to be used against us to stop food at the border,” he says.

Even the best companies can be duped. Both Heinz and Kraft, which have rigorous quality control measures in place, were allegedly duped when a tomato supplier sold moldy tomato paste as a higher-grade product. The FBI dubbed their investigation “Operation Rotten Tomato.”

The head of the supplier company, SK Foods, one of the largest tomato processors in the U.S., was arrested in February and charged.

Contacted several times over the past week, the Canadian Food Inspection Agency, which is responsible for food labels in this country, was not able to say whether a similar monitoring system is being considered here.

Hanner says he has had no dealings with Canadian officials about food monitoring.

“I'm having more success working with U.S. agencies on this than I have up here,” he says.

Canada is not immune to the problem, he says, adding that technologies such as those he's working on with the FDA could also be used here.

Hanner says fish is especially prone to food fraud because it can be difficult to tell one variety of fish from another by just looking at it — unlike other types of meat.

In a high-profile case last year, a Virginia man was convicted of selling 10 million pounds of cheap, frozen catfish fillets from Vietnam as much more expensive grouper, red snapper and flounder.

The fish was bought by national chain retailers, wholesalers and food service companies, and ended up on dinner plates across the States.

It's not just fish, however.

Honey makers have alleged that their competitors dilute their product with sugar beets or corn syrup. Other cases of “food fraud” have been reported in fruit juice, olive oil, spices, vinegar, wine, spirits and maple syrup. Last month a French court indicted 12 people after millions of bottles of pinot noir were found to contain cheaper grapes not supposed to be used in the wine.

Food fraud has been around for centuries, but tends to increase during tough economic times as food companies look to cut costs — opening the door to unscrupulous sellers passing off cheap cuts of meat or fish as more expensive ones.

Hanner said consumers need to be concerned, especially if they have health issues or want to ensure they are shopping ethically.

Grocers and food manufacturers can be victims of the fraud, he says, since they rely on dozens, even hundreds, of suppliers to get ingredients needed for their products.

That's why the Washington-based Grocery Manufacturers Association, which represents American food companies, has commissioned a study into food fraud in the U.S.

“It's growing very rapidly, and there's more of it than you might think,” said James Morehouse, a senior partner at A.T. Kearney Inc., the company studying the issue for the GMA.

John Spink, an expert on food and packaging fraud at Michigan State University, estimates that 5 to 7 per cent of the food supply is fraudulently labeled, and warns the number could be greater.

“We know what we seized at the border, but we have no idea what we didn't seize,” he said.

Hanner would like to see a study in Canada similar to the U.S. grocers' investigation, saying it could be the first step to setting up an ongoing monitoring program here — perhaps as a partnership between government and the private sector, he says.

As it is, the investigations have been ad hoc, and often media driven.

Last summer, for instance, the *Star* collected 12 sushi samples from restaurants across the city and had them genetically tested. Ten listed on menus as the more alluring red snapper were actually tilapia.

One listed as “red snapper from Japan” was actually red seabream, while another was correctly listed on the menu as red seabream but identified by a waiter as “Japanese snapper.”

The CFIA opened an investigation after the *Star* story appeared, but was unable to say what the conclusion was. Last summer, the agency's Alison Pinsent said the results of the CFIA investigation might not be made public. She could not be reached for comment.

Last week, the CBC's consumer watchdog show, *Marketplace*, aired a similar study, with similar results.

Hanner says he hopes such exposure will help nudge the CFIA and the industry into taking action.

The Food and Consumer Products of Canada association, which represents food makers in Canada, did not have a spokesperson available for comment Tuesday.

With Star wire services