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Of Trees and Forest

A Postscript to Food Safety

Two incidents, which happened while my series on Senate Bill No. 3311, the proposed Food Safety Act, was coming on this paper, prompted me to write this addendum.

The first was the ban on six brands of noodles imported from Korea. These are Nongshim Neoguri (Hot), Nongshim Neoguri (Mild Hot), Nongshim Neoguri (Multi Hot), Nongshim Big Bowl Noodle, Shrimp, Nongshim Saengsaeng Udon Bowl Noodle, and Nongshim Saengsaeng Udon.

The Department of Health, through the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), imposed the ban on November 12 after learning that the Korea Food and Drug Administration (KFDA) had earlier asked the Nong Shim Co., Ltd., which manufactures all six noodle brands, to recall its products for safety reasons.

The ban was lifted several days later upon the request of the Korean Embassy, which gave assurances on the safety of Korean noodle products being sold in the Philippines, and after tests conducted by the FDA.

The FDA imposed the ban after being alerted by the EcoWaste Coalition, a non-government organization, that the six Korean noodle brands contained benzopyrene, which could cause cancer. The FDA said its tests showed that the banned noodles contained less than 5 ppb (parts per billion) of benzopyrene, far below the regulatory limit of 10 ppb.

However, the KFDA, which also conducted a thorough test on the Nong Shim products, issued a certificate last November 7 that the level of benzopyrene found in the noodles, which ranged from 0.4 to 1.6 ppb, was extremely low and has no harmful effect on the human body.

The second incident involved the health risks from some mugs being sold in Metro Manila and have become popular as Christmas gifts because they are cheap, costing P20 to P85 each. The EcoWaste Coalition found that out of the 35 sample mugs it examined, 29 contained an average of 12,643 parts per million of lead, way above the US limit of 90 ppm of lead in paint.

These two incidents confirmed the urgency of passing Senate Bill No. 3311 at the soonest possible time. And these underscored the importance of coordination and cooperation between the government and the public, as well as between government agencies.

SB 3311 will institutionalize such coordination and cooperation among government agencies because it provides the specific mandates of concerned agencies, as follows: The Department of Agriculture for the primary production and post-harvest stages of the food supply chain; the Department of Health for the safety of processed and pre-packaged foods; the local government units for food safety in the food businesses such as slaughterhouses, dressing plants, fish ports, wet markets, restaurants, and water-refilling stations; the Department of Interior and Local Government, in coordination with the agriculture and health departments and other agencies, for the enforcement of food safety and sanitary rules and regulations, as well as the inspection and compliance of business establishments and facilities within its territorial jurisdiction; and the agriculture

and health departments, in coordination with the local government units, for the monitoring of the presence of biological, chemical, and contaminants in food products.

To strengthen coordination among the concerned agencies and to ensure the effective enforcement of food safety rules and regulations, SB 3311 provides for the creation of the Food Safety Regulation Coordinating Board (FSRCB), whose powers and functions include the following: Monitoring and coordinating the performance and implementation of the mandates of the health, local government, and agriculture departments and the local government units in food safety regulation; crisis management and planning during food safety emergencies; establishment of policies and procedures for coordination among agencies involved in food safety; and continuous evaluation of the effectiveness of enforcement of food safety regulations and research and training programs.

I must say that it is commendable that we have public interest groups like the EcoWaste Coalition that keep watch on possible health threats from food and other products, which is a primary responsibility of the government. Consumers rely on the government to make sure that the food they eat is safe.

In my view, the Food Safety Act will enable the government to provide such assurance to our people.

(For comments/feedback email to: mbv_secretariat@yahoo.com. Readers may view previous columns at www.senatorvillar.com)

LINK:

<http://www.mb.com.ph/articles/382351/a-postscript-to-food-safety#.ULMcf-SsjTo>