

STATEMENT OF SENATOR TOM HARKIN
U.S.-CHINA ECONOMIC AND SECURITY REVIEW COMMISSION
“ACCESS TO INFORMATION IN THE PEOPLE’S REPUBLIC OF CHINA”
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I would like to thank the Commission for holding this hearing on access to information in the People’s Republic of China, an issue of great importance because of its implications for the trade relationship between the United States and China. Transparency fosters a healthy trade relationship between countries; one of the most critical elements of transparency is allowing a nation to ensure that imports are safe for its consumers. With transparency, when problems with imported goods arise, consumers of those goods can immediately see adequate regulatory action taken in the exporting country, and regulatory officials from both countries can identify areas where improvement is needed and can document the results of actions taken to rectify any problems.

This year, the safety of imported products – especially from China – has been called into question because of a series of well-publicized events that have led to recalls of large volumes of products. In April, wheat gluten and rice protein concentrate produced in China were found to be laced with a chemical called melamine, used to falsely boost the protein content in the products to command a higher price. This contamination was found after pets in the United States became ill and died, reportedly in the hundreds, from consuming the tainted ingredients in pet food. The contaminated ingredients were also found in animal feed, resulting in human exposure.

In May, toothpaste in the United States and other countries imported from China was found to contain diethylene glycol, an ingredient in antifreeze, prompting officials to warn consumers not to use any toothpaste made in China. In June, 1.5 million toy trains produced in China were recalled because they were manufactured with lead-based paint, and 450,000 tires from China were recalled because they were defective. Later that month, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration announced a ban on farm-raised eel, shrimp, catfish, basa and dace from China due to contamination with antimicrobial agents not approved in aquaculture production in the United States.

U.S. consumers are not alone in their wariness of products made in China. Panama has experienced perhaps one of the most egregious examples of lack of adequate food and drug safety regulations in China: cough syrup tainted with diethylene glycol – the same ingredient found in toothpaste here in the United States – has led to the deaths of approximately 120 people, with 250 deaths under investigation. To be sure, China is not alone in the production of counterfeit products, or in having problems in its food and drug safety systems. However, the mixed responses from Chinese officials to all of these incidents do not instill confidence in the country’s goods. China has promised better oversight and has closed down companies with safety problems, yet at the same time, has blamed affected countries for the counterfeit products, has banned imported products from affected countries, and has widely publicized the execution of a top food and drug safety official who was not involved in recent problems as he was removed from his position in 2005.

China’s actions following the incidents highlighted above reveal the lack of transparency in China’s regulatory system. It is clear from recent events that China’s food, drug, and product safety regulations are in dire need of an overhaul, yet that

nation's officials are not forthcoming about what needs to be fixed. Safety problems with products are not documented and made easily accessible, thus keeping the public in the dark regarding what it is consuming, fostering corruption in government, and relieving government officials from taking enforcement action. Although the United States cannot directly fix China's problems, I am interested in receiving recommendations from this Commission on how the United States can work with China to ensure greater access to information surrounding these incidents and thereby to impel China to cure the defects in its safety system for food and other products. Greater transparency in China's food, drug, and product regulations and enforcement actions is a necessary first step to assuring product safety and instilling consumer confidence, both in China and the United States. If this lack of transparency remains, not only will it endanger our trade relationship with China, but it will be to the detriment of consumers around the world.