

From: SMART Archive
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Subject: PRC Claims of COVID Transmission via Cold Chain Food Imports Growing

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Subject: PRC Claims of COVID Transmission via Cold Chain Food Imports Growing

1. ~~(SBU)~~ **Summary:** Although official PRC data indicate the community transmission of COVID-19 has been largely eliminated in China, there continue to be small-scale outbreaks throughout the country. PRC authorities have implicated imported, refrigerated (i.e., cold chain) food products and packaging as the probable vector for many of these outbreaks, while the World Health Organization and UN Food and Agriculture Organization maintain that transmission of COVID via food products and food packaging is highly unlikely. Some state media appear to be using the alleged transmission via imported food to cast doubt on a Wuhan origin for COVID-19. The PRC has implemented a series of measures purportedly aimed at limiting the spread of COVID via the cold chain, including a system of disinfecting, testing, and tracing cold chain imports. To-date, the PRC has suspended food imports from 99 food companies based in 20 countries due to COVID contamination. Trading partners continue to push the PRC to make its data and analysis on cold chain transmission public, and to be transparent about testing and rules for suspended products. Likeminded contacts in Beijing advocate concerted action through multilateral organizations to push the PRC to provide data the global scientific community can use to evaluate China's claims and take appropriate mitigation measures. **End Summary.**

Science on Cold Chain COVID Transmission Still Emerging

2. ~~(SBU)~~ Following a June 2020 outbreak of COVID-19 linked to the Xinfadi wholesale food market in Beijing (Reference 20 Beijing 1022), Chinese investigators discovered the SARS-CoV-2 virus on a cutting board used for salmon. They concluded the outbreak may have been linked to imported seafood, though virus samples were also found on food products from other parts of the market. In early July, Deputy Director of the PRC State Food Safety Evaluation

Center Li Ning stated the evidence indicated there was only a very slight possibility that cold chain food could have been the source of the Xinfadi outbreak. None of the over 80,000 COVID cases previously reported in the PRC had been linked to imported food. Following an October outbreak in Qingdao, a port city on China's eastern coast, which infected 13 people including dock workers and the hospital staff treating them, the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention (China CDC) announced it had detected and isolated live coronavirus on the packaging of imported frozen fish, and had found virus with the same genetic sequence in infected workers. Until the results of an epidemiologic investigation on the Qingdao cases are made known, it remains unclear whether the workers caught the virus elsewhere and transferred it to the packaging, or whether the packaging itself was the source of the infection. Following the Qingdao outbreak, several subsequent cases of individuals infected with COVID have also been attributed to imported cold chain food, including in Dalian, Tianjin, Chengdu, Yanbian, and Shanghai. Over just the past two weeks, PRC authorities also claim to have detected the SARS-CoV-2 virus on French pork in Xiamen, German pork in Shandong, Indian fish in Shanxi, Argentinian beef in Jiangsu, Brazilian beef in Wuhan, Argentinian pork in Henan, and beef from New Zealand. (Note: New Zealand has disputed the findings. End note.)

3. ~~(SBU)~~ Medical experts outside the PRC note that although Chinese research papers they have seen to-date provide some data supporting the hypothesis that the virus can be transmitted through cold chain products, the evidence is not conclusive. Chinese research on this topic is still preliminary, and it is not possible to replicate the results in countries with high rates of community transmission, or in countries that are not routinely performing environmental sampling on imported products. In New Zealand, a country that has also had scattered cases and a low incidence of community transmission, scientists have not found evidence to support the cold chain transmission theory. From the Chinese research findings published so far, it is not clear whether the food on which the virus was found was contaminated as a result of improper handling in the market or somewhere else on the supply chain. It is also not clear whether virus particles on food can be aerosolized to infect people and whether there are also risks to consumers of the products. Thus far, PRC authorities have reported that only workers handling the products have been infected, not consumers. The PRC's aggressive testing campaigns following detection of cases connected to cold chain food products have determined that few workers from affected facilities tested positive. In October, China CDC announced it had found 22 positive samples out of 670,000 cold chain food packaging samples tested. This suggests the likelihood of contracting the virus via cold chain products is very low compared with human-to-human transmission via airborne particles.

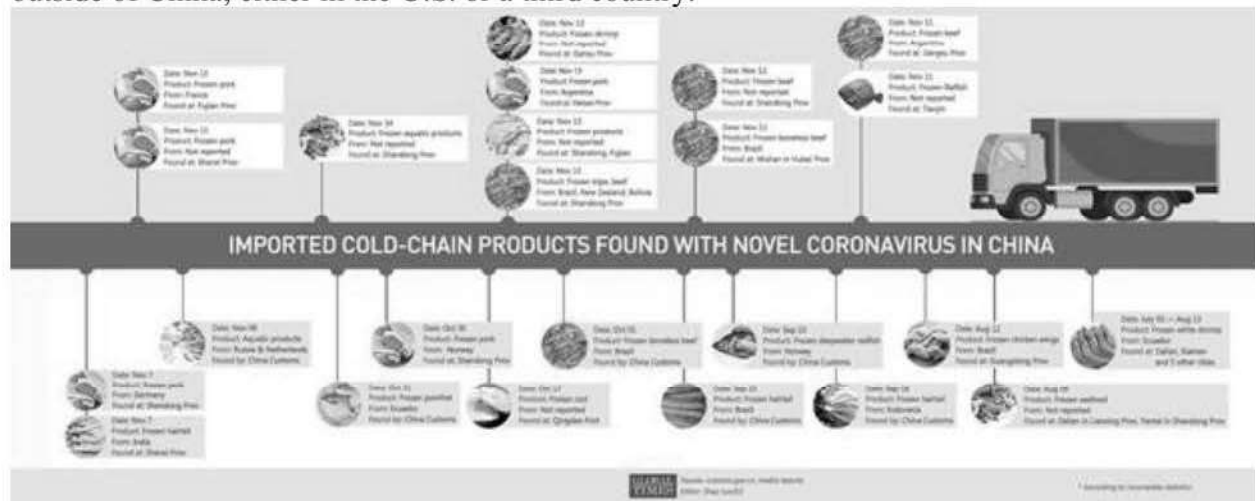
PRC Tracing and Testing Based on Weak Sources; Create Uncertain Commercial Conditions

4. ~~(SBU)~~ On November 9, following statements by China CDC and other health authorities that several recent COVID outbreaks in the PRC were linked to cold chain food imports, the State Council issued guidance requiring disinfection, testing, and traceability for all imported cold chain food products. (Note: In practice, it appears that the guidelines are being implemented unevenly at different ports. In a recent cursory review of imported cold chain products at a local grocery store in Beijing, only a small number of products on display were marked to indicate that they met inspection, disinfection, and tracing requirements. End Note.) Companies with products that test positive face import suspensions that the PRC's General Administration of Customs (GACC) calls "temporary," but which in practice have no clear end date. As of mid-November, the PRC had suspended cold chain food imports from some 99 companies based in

20 countries. Though virus samples have not been found on any U.S. imports, GACC has suspended two U.S. poultry facilities from exporting to China based on information reportedly gleaned from the internet about COVID cases among workers in those plants. Contacts from third countries have concurred that PRC authorities seem to be basing decisions to suspend imports from various facilities (whose products had not tested positive) largely on foreign news articles about outbreaks, and exporters have not received clear information on the reasons for the suspension or the process for re-certification. Exporters could also be negatively impacted by additional costs associated with mandatory disinfecting and tracing of products, and the possibility that importers may become less willing to take the risk of importing food products that could be destroyed or returned should they test positive upon arrival.

State Media Seizes on Narratives that Deflect PRC Responsibility

5. ~~(SBU)~~ No internationally peer-reviewed study supports the hypothesis that the COVID virus can be transmitted through the cold chain. Research published in Chinese scientific journals – notably in a October 27 article by Tsinghua University, China CDC, and the Chinese Academy of Medical Sciences in China’s “National Science Review” –discussed the cold chain theory as a source of possible transmission, but not as a theory for how the virus appeared in China. However, some PRC state media outlets have speculated that the source of the outbreak in Wuhan could have been imported frozen seafood, including the Global Times on November 16 and Xinhua on November 17 (see figure below for a recent example of PRC state media reporting on cold chain transmission). Contacts have argued the narrative of COVID entering China on imported cold chain food could be used by the PRC to obfuscate the origins of the virus and deflect responsibility for its botched early handling of pandemic. One informed PRC media sector contact recently opined to us that a third of China’s population believes COVID originated outside of China, either in the U.S. or a third country.



On November 16, Global Times, a State-run Media Outlet published the above outbreak timeline in an article entitled “Was Wuhan Outbreak Caused by Imported Food Products?”

<https://www.globaltimes.cn/content/1207027.shtml>

Like- Minded Partners Critical of PRC Approach on Cold Chain Transmission Issue

6. ~~(SBU)~~ During a November 11 meeting of Agricultural Counselors from 30 countries in Beijing, participants agreed the PRC’s actions to curtail cold chain transmission had not yet had a significant impact on trade, but confirmed the need to push China to share data on its findings and clarify its testing, disinfection, and certification procedures through the WTO. Participants

agreed the PRC's actions on this issue have been inconsistent and not science-based, and that improper disinfection without separating imports by product and risk type could create more food safety problems.

7. ~~(SBU)~~ Although some countries whose imports have been suspended complied with PRC requests for information and "video audits" of facilities, those facilities have not been re-certified, and companies alleged that some of the PRC information requests were related to corporate trade secrets, not food safety. A Brazilian contact confirmed that despite requests, the PRC has not provided a copy of the test results for the products it claimed tested positive for COVID-19. Additionally, it was unclear whether the virus samples the PRC reportedly found were of live virus or only non-viable fragments of viral RNA, which the interlocutor said was insufficient to confirm the products in question posed an infection risk.

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