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WHO Caught Between China and West on Frozen-Food Coronavirus Transmission

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The World Health Organization is caught in an escalating dispute over whether the coronavirus is spreading on frozen-food packaging, as China steps up efforts to promote the theory and the U.S., European Union and others lobby against extra checks on their goods.

The WHO has been formulating new advice for the public on the issue. A draft sent to The Wall Street Journal warns that the virus could spread via the cold chain and be reintroduced into countries where the pandemic is under control.

WHO officials say the draft wasn't cleared for publication and was sent in error. They added it was designed to reflect recent evidence, including scientific papers, media reports and presentations by China to the organization, but said the wording hadn't been finalized.

[Beijing has blamed frozen-food imports](#) as one cause of a string of recent outbreaks, and it has introduced mandatory testing and disinfection of foreign goods, saying it found traces of the virus on packaging of products including American pork, Saudi shrimp and Brazilian beef.

The U.S., EU and several other governments are meanwhile disputing Beijing's assessment of the evidence, as are many experts outside China.

Those countries have been preparing a joint letter to Beijing calling its restrictions unfair, and saying they see no significant risk that the virus is spreading via the cold chain, according to people familiar with the document.

China is already requiring some foreign slaughterhouses and seafood providers to allow video inspection of their facilities. Shipments have perished waiting for customs agents to test and disinfect boxes, according to EU lobby group FoodDrinkEurope. Some companies have had their goods banned after failing Beijing's tests, while others have simply stopped exporting to China, deeming its demands too onerous.

"They are taking each single box and spreading it out in a big room...and then they spray something on the outside of the box," says Regin Jacobsen, CEO of Bakkafrost, a Faeroe Islands seafood exporter who says sales to China have roughly halved since restrictions began.

The disagreement comes as a [WHO team is in Wuhan](#), the Chinese city where the first Covid-19 infections were identified more than a year ago, on a long-delayed mission to search for the source of the virus.

It also coincides with escalating [Chinese efforts to promote theories](#)—some without scientific basis—that the pandemic didn't begin in China.

China's health and customs agencies didn't respond to requests for comment.

China appeared to have largely controlled the pandemic within its borders by April but in recent weeks [has reported hundreds of new cases](#), blaming them primarily on refrigerated imports and people returning from abroad.

Feng Zijian, deputy head of the Chinese Center for Disease Control and Prevention, said Wednesday that the live virus was found on imported cold-chain items including seafood and packaging, and on some nonrefrigerated items.

“This has proved that these live viruses on the surface of objects in a contaminated environment can cause human infection,” he said.

Beijing this month expanded its testing and disinfection regime to cover all containerized goods from high-risk countries.

The WHO's website says the virus can survive for several hours on surfaces such as cardboard, plastic and steel under laboratory conditions—and could spread via objects close to infected people—but describes disinfecting packaging materials as unnecessary.

“There is no evidence to date of viruses that cause respiratory illnesses being transmitted via food or food packaging,” it says.

However, the updated WHO draft seen by the Journal says: “Recent studies and reports have highlighted that the virus could survive a long time under frozen and cold-storage conditions, and that the transmission of the virus could occur from an external frozen package to an individual.”

The draft describes the risk to consumers as minimal, but adds: “On rare occasions, foods can be contaminated during production and in the case of frozen products, the virus could persist on the food or its packaging during international transport. For countries that have brought the virus under control, this could become a possible source of reintroduction of the virus.”

WHO officials say the draft was a potential update to a Q&A designed for the general public and that they haven't changed their technical guidance for governments and health professionals.

“We have asked for but not received data around China's tests of frozen-food packaging,” a WHO spokesperson said.

Some experts say disagreement on interpreting the evidence reflects contrasting approaches to the pandemic between China, which is trying to get its caseload to zero, and other countries where the virus is far more widespread.

“For a country like China where the disease has almost been eliminated arithmetically, allowing any importation of the virus is important and potentially catastrophic,” said Peter Ben Embarek, a food-safety scientist currently on the WHO’s delegation to Wuhan. “But it seems to be extremely rare.”

Others say the disagreement reflects enduring political tensions over the pandemic.

“The politics are, unfortunately, a part of what’s going on, but for us, we have to be driven by the evidence,” said April Baller, a WHO infection-control expert.

Dr. Baller said an Oxford University team was assessing roughly 60 peer-reviewed studies on the subject for the WHO and had seen no evidence that the live virus could be cultivated from surfaces, although traces of genetic material have been found.

Chinese officials and researchers have argued that the virus spreads via the cold chain ever since a [June outbreak tied to a Beijing wholesale market](#), which they blamed on imported salmon.

Still, Chinese health authorities have publicized only one case where the live virus was found on frozen goods—a shipment of imported cod that Beijing says [caused an outbreak in the port city of Qingdao](#) in October.

In all other cases, Chinese authorities have found only traces of viral genetic material using a polymerase chain reaction, or PCR, test, which cannot tell if the virus is still alive and infectious.

Out of 1.29 million samples checked, 47 had positive PCR tests, according to Chinese customs figures.

Scientists outside China who have studied viral contamination on surfaces say that transmission of the virus on frozen-food packaging imported to China is highly unlikely.

The amount of viable virus on a surface diminishes by about 10 times after freezing and thawing, and then continues to decline, said Vincent Munster, a virus ecologist at the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases, part of the U.S. National Institutes of Health.

“There’s absolutely no evidence supporting that theory,” he said of the assertion that frozen-food packages have helped cause outbreaks in China.

In a study published in April 2020, Dr. Munster found that the virus can survive up to 72 hours on plastic and up to 24 hours on cardboard. But the amount of viable virus is low and reduces over time, he said.

The U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which has studied the issue for months, said on its website that the risk of getting sick with Covid-19 from handling frozen food and food packaging is considered very low.

“There is no evidence that contaminated packages transmit the infection,” said a spokeswoman for the European Commission, the EU’s executive arm.

New Zealand, which has controlled the pandemic within its borders, hasn’t found evidence of the virus entering via packaging on imported food—frozen or nonfrozen—and it doesn’t require them to be tested or disinfected, according to a government spokesman.

He said New Zealand authorities were aware of the letter being circulated by countries protesting China’s restrictions but hadn’t decided whether to sign.

—Rhiannon Hoyle in Sydney contributed to this article.