

China Serves up New Food Safety Penalties

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CHINA - A revision to China's Food Safety Law had its first reading on Monday (23 June) and pledges tough sanctions for offenders, promising the strictest food safety supervision system.

The current law has helped improve food safety, but the situation remains severe, said Zhang Yong, head of the food and drug administration, when briefing the lawmakers at the bi-monthly session of the Standing Committee of the National People's Congress (NPC), which will run through Monday to Friday.

The existing system is not effective, penalties are comparatively light and it does not deter offenders, Mr Yong said.

A number of shocking malpractices, including injecting clenbuterol into pork, recycling cooking oil from leftovers in restaurant kitchens, selling pork from sick pigs, making medicine capsules with toxic gelatin and passing rat and fox meat off as mutton and beef have been headline news in China recently.

The latest case was use of illegal additives in growing bean sprouts, one of China's most popular vegetables. Police in east China's Shandong Province seized nearly two tonnes of toxic bean sprouts last week.

The bill is considered a move to realize the promise the current leadership made at the third plenary session of the 18th Communist Party of China Central Committee in last November, which is to establish the strictest ever supervision system on food safety.

Through the law amendment, the country expects to impose the harshest civil, administrative and criminal penalties on offenders and toughest punishment on supervisors who neglect their duties, Mr Yong said.

According to the bill, consumers can demand reparation worth of three times of loss they suffer from substandard food. Current law only allows compensation of ten times of the price of food.

As substandard food can be very cheap and can cause serious health problems and great financial losses, consumers expect to get higher compensation if the revision is adopted.

Bigger fines for offenders are also on the menu. Producers can face fines of up to 30 times of the value of their products, up from ten times in the current law. If the products are worth less than 10,000 yuan (1,600 US dollars), those involved can be fined a maximum of 150,000 yuan, up from 50,000 yuan in the current law.

The bill adds provisions to punish landlords of production sites who know that illegal activities are being undertaken on their property, and suppliers who sell unlawful substances to producers, knowing that they will be added to foods. Their illegal income will be seized and they can be fined up to 200,000 yuan.

Administrative penalties, such as demotion and dismissal, will be imposed on officials who fail to respond to food safety emergencies and remove loopholes. They will also be held responsible for food safety cover-ups. Similar punishments will be dished out to officials with food and drug regulatory agencies, health and agriculture departments.

Those caught abusing their power and neglecting their duty for personal gain will face criminal penalties.

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