

May 6, 2010

Some of Nation's Biggest Honey Importers Develop Plans to Warn Public of Bogus Products

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AOL News

After years of downplaying and even ignoring the problem of illegal and often-tainted foreign honey smuggled onto U.S. grocery shelves and into food products, major North American importers and sellers of the sweet syrup today told the public that it has to wake up to the threat.

“We estimate that millions of pounds of Chinese honey continue to enter the U.S. from countries that do not have commercial honey businesses,” said Jill Clark, president of Dutch Gold Honey, of Lancaster, Penn.

“For example, countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, Taiwan, Thailand, the Philippines and Mongolia raise few bees and have no history of producing honey in commercial quantities, yet have recently exported large amounts of honey to the United States,” Clark added in a statement announcing the creation of website which tells consumers, honey companies, food manufacturers and retailers what actions to take to eliminate illegally imported honey.

The site, called “HonestHoney.com,” is supported by Dutch Gold, Golden Heritage Foods of Hillsboro, Kan., Burleson’s Inc. from Waxahachie, Texas, and Odem International from Rosemere, Ont., one of North America’s largest honey suppliers.

For more than three years, federal investigators have had hit-or-miss successes trying to intercept box car-sized loads of illegally labeled honey coming into ports on both coasts and the Gulf of Mexico. More than a dozen arrests have been made of honey launderers and reportedly “active

investigations” are targeting a number of other major players in the international scam.

Almost all have centered on honey from China being intentionally mislabeled as coming from elsewhere to avoid paying stiff import tariffs. But also, the more rigorous scrutiny directed at honey from that country that is often contaminated with illegal animal antibiotics.

Those behind the initiative to alert the public say the illegal sales of honey have cost the U.S. up to \$200 million in uncollected import duties in the past two years and threaten the domestic honey business and the future of America’s beekeepers.

“When honey is imported illegally, no one can be confident of its true source and quality. Some products are not 100 percent honey and have other quality issues,” said Clark.

While many consumers only think about honey as the golden liquid in plastic honey bears, in reality most of the honey imported into the U.S. is delivered in 250-gallon or tanker car-sized loads and ends up as an ingredient in cereals, breads, cookies, crackers, breakfast bars, meats, salad dressings, barbeque sauces, mustards, beverages, ice creams, yogurts and candies.

Investigators say that some of the food processors are prime, often-willing, targets for brokers trying to offload lower-cost, bogus honey.

Last week, AOL News reported that the nation's leading honey packers and sellers gathered for a secret meeting in Chicago to discuss the impact that the smuggling was having on their business. Of the four groups that launched today’s public awareness campaign, only representatives of Dutch Gold and Golden Heritage, were listed as attending the unpublicized roundtable.

Some of the nation’s largest honey packagers and major suppliers did not join the public education program launched

today (cq Thursday). For example, not listed among the participants is Sue Bee, formally known as Sioux Bee Honey, which says it's the country's largest supplier of honey – about 40-million pounds each year. The company did not respond to e-mail messages Wednesday night.

Investigations into international honey laundering were first detailed in December 2008 by the Seattle Post-Intelligencer

Identifying honey's country of origin with scientific certainty may now be easier.

For the first time, a U.S. lab is able to conduct such tests. Until recently, only a very busy lab in Germany was capable of helping the honey trade and criminal investigators verify the true source of the golden nectar.

Texas A&M University announced last week that Vaughn Bryant, a palynologist and an anthropology professor, is now the only person in the U.S. doing melissopalynology – the study of pollen in honey that allows identification of its country of origin.

Performing isotopic studies, Bryant says has examined more than 100 honey samples for importers, exporters, beekeepers and producers with his DNA-based analysis. Many of the samples he analyzed contained labels from other countries when in fact they originated in China but were re-routed to avoid tariffs of up to 500 percent, the professor said.

Some foreign exporters get around the tariff by mixing honey from different sources, others infuse up to 50 percent high fructose corn syrup into the honey. It is becoming common now for smugglers to use a process called ultra-filtration which removes the pollen and makes it almost

impossible for any laboratory to determine its origin.

"The beekeepers of the U.S. have been pleading with the Food and Drug Administration to enact stricter guidelines about accurate labeling for honey, but that is a long, slow process," Bryant said. "Meanwhile, I'm trying to help out here and there, but it's almost impossible to keep up."

<http://www.aolnews.com/nation/article/honey-smugglers-have-companies-fighting-back/19467142>