

Australia mulls tougher food screening after China hepatitis scare

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Tougher food screening measures could be introduced in Australia with frozen berries from China linked to a growing number of hepatitis A infections, Agriculture Minister Barnaby Joyce said Wednesday.

Nanna's and Creative Gourmet brand raspberries and mixed berries were recalled after they were linked to four infections in New South Wales and Victoria states, with poor hygiene or contaminated water at their packing factory thought to be responsible.

Since then more infections have emerged in Queensland and Western Australia, with the government confirming at least 13 cases nationally so far.

Asked whether the scare demanded more controls on imports, Joyce said: "That might be a consequence of a review that is being undertaken."

Joyce also called for a strengthening of Australian labelling laws on food products and urged consumers to buy local produce.

"We have stronger laws, we do have stronger oversight to make sure we have a cleaner, green product than what comes in from overseas," he told the Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

"That's why you pay a premium for Australian product... I want to make sure that when you pick up something, you can look at the can and say

'This is Australian'. It's slightly dearer but by gosh it's safer."

However, Prime Minister Tony Abbott was cool on labelling changes, warning it could impose more regulation on business.

"The bottom line is that companies shouldn't be poisoning their customers," he said.

"We're certainly looking at what we can do to toughen up screening, but we also need to look to business to lift its game here."

The recalled products were packed in China and contained raspberries, strawberries and blackberries grown there, and blueberries from Chile.

Australia's Agriculture Department said it was engaging with Chinese authorities through its embassy in Beijing, "seeking assurances about the safety of further shipments of frozen berries exported from China".

It has also requested a review of the risk status of frozen berries from Food Standards Australia New Zealand, although it noted that the hepatitis virus is often present in such low levels it cannot be detected in contaminated food.

Australian regulators currently consider imported frozen berries "surveillance foods"—meaning they are tested at a rate of only five percent of all consignments for 49 agricultural chemical residues, as well as for packaging and labelling requirements.

Hepatitis A is a viral disease that affects the liver, causing abdominal pain, nausea, vomiting, fatigue and jaundice. It has an incubation period of up to 50 days.

The government said the source of the hepatitis A virus was still

unconfirmed, but the Health Department said: "The berries are the only common exposure for all cases."

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