

Food Safety and its Challenge in Taiwan

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I . Introduction

Food safety in Taiwan became important while the “good agricultural practice” system was promoted in 1994 for fruits and vegetables. After the outbreak of Foot and Mouth Disease in 1997, not only pork product exports to Japan had been forbidden for years but also domestic consumers had stopped the purchase of any pork products for at least 4 months. The doubt on possible negative health influence of “Genetically Modified Organism, GMO” products in the 1990s, the 1997 Hong Kong case and 2004 outbreak of H5N1 (Highly pathogenic avian influenza, HPAI) in Asian area, and the 1996 “Mad cow disease” or “Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy, BSE” epidemics prevailed in England were major influences for countries and consumers paying great attention to food safety globally. Quality standards set for domestic and import agricultural products become significant supports for food safety and quarantine barriers across borders.

To promote high quality and safety food for consumers and comply with the national level of protection, Taiwan government integrates different quality and safety standards for crops and meats and turns to build up a “good quality agricultural products” system with various quality (outlook and tastes) and safety (biological and non biological) standards and procedures, rules and laws, and certification labels or logos. There are at least five major safety certifications with complete authentication system including GAP label for fruits and vegetables, Organic agricultural product label, CAS label for good foods, Quality Rice label, and Quality Honey label. Among these quality labels, GAP and Quality Honey may only be applied to production and marketing teams of local farmers and other labels may be applied by single farm and agribusiness. The safety standards of these labels provide similar safety standards for imported foods and agricultural products. The main policy purpose is to support quality and safety foods for consumers “from farm to table”.

II . Policy Measures

For safety agricultural products, certification systems of GAP (good agricultural practice), CAS (certified agricultural standards) good agricultural products including CAS Organic agricultural products and CAS quality rice are all included and introduced in the internet as the platform for promoting quality agricultural products and foods.

GAP logo was registered by “Taiwan Agricultural Chemicals and Toxic Substances Research Institute, Council of Agriculture, Executive Yuan (TACTRI) in 1994 for the promotion of safety fruits and vegetables in Taiwan. The Institute is under the auspices of the Council of Agriculture, Executive Yuan. TACTRI, more specifically, is responsible for developing pesticide research, monitoring pesticide residues and toxic substances in agricultural products, developing plant protection technologies, providing technical services, and establishing evaluation methods and guidelines to control pesticides.

TACTRI's missions can be summarized as follows:

1. to technically support the regulatory control and registration of pesticides.
2. to improve the production process of plant protection materials, supply high-quality pesticides, and develop new formulae to increase the efficiency of agricultural production; and to carry out safety evaluation of the usage of pesticides.

3. to assist other national research institutes and local farmers by developing plant protection techniques to ensure the safe, economic, and effective use of pesticides in Taiwan.

III. Challenges for future

There are several challenges for the safety promotion on agricultural products and foods in future Taiwan:

1. The prices of different safety foods are the response of consumers' preference in markets. Thus, lower priced safety goods such as GAP products may need re-examination on its difficulties in future market development.
2. The rules for the application of safety certification may restrict the development of agribusiness due to government subsidies to teams which are far from agribusiness.
3. The policy measures should consider an integrated certification mark or logo like JAS in order to make the policy target clear.
4. Environmental value needs to be explored more to save good quality farming lands and the strong linkage between environmental protection and product price must be promoted.
5. New incentives for farmers and agribusiness to produce safety and quality agricultural products are necessary because only few organic products can have higher price but not high enough for sustainable production.
6. The safety agricultural products must have suitable market prices to support supply side and meet the requirement of consumption side for long-run development.
7. The labeling of safety standards and origin may need to be clarified clearly for the recognition of consumers in domestic market.
8. Marketing channels need proper promotional strategy to catch the heart of consumers in different channels.
9. Safety control over supply chain of livestock supply chain may need long-run experimentation for its cost effectiveness which may in turn support the profits of farmers.

IV. Conclusions

Food safety is an important issue in domestic and foreign markets in terms of consumers' health and international trade expansion. Government is requested to be the manager and promoter of safety foods. Thus, safety food certification system is necessary for the benefits of farmers, agribusiness, consumers, and the government. Taiwan provides at least five major safety and quality certification logos for agricultural products. Long-term achievements are visible and new challenges are much more over time.

It is clear that managers of safety certification try hard to promote safety products and policy measures include all possible dimensions. However, the unification of certification system may be needed to reduce the confusion of consumers about different labels. The effectiveness of safety and quality certification is also required evaluation for policy achievements and improvement. The increase of organic production may be one important indicator for the effectiveness of policy measures.

Food safety is very good for consumers but may not be so good for farmers due to the imbalance of market supply and demand. The cost of producing safety foods must be shared by some government supports in order to increase the incentives for farmers to abide by. By theory and practical experience, the understanding of consumer demand is the right force for farmers to follow in market supply. The reduction of food-borne disease spread risk is important one. Thus, the government is urgent to help farmers understanding what most consumers want and setting up necessary procedure to match demand side. It is also important that farmers need the help of marketing strategies from the government in order to benefit most people in the society.