

Taiwan Education in Taiwan Rebuilds Confidence Following Food Safety Scare

Food safety concerns in Taiwan related to “greening” of potatoes have finally been put to rest, thanks to the combined efforts of Potatoes USA trade education and market access work. On November 2, 2018, Taiwan implemented a new glycoalkaloids standard, which is now being used to assess levels of solanine (greening) in imported potatoes and potato products. The implementation of the standard caps more than a year of work by Potatoes USA, the potato industry and the USDA to address concerns that were impacting the US potato export trade.

The issue of potato greening emerged in August 2017 when customers at a few quick service chains spotted a small amount of green on their fries. These incidents were reported on by major media, arousing public concern. Consumers were warned that any greening on potatoes can be toxic and harmful to their health regardless of the level of solanine.

In fact, potatoes naturally produce the glycoalkaloid, solanine, as a defense mechanism. When potato tubers are exposed to light, they turn green and increase glycoalkaloid production. The green color is from chlorophyll, and is itself harmless. However, it is an indication that an increased level of solanine may be present. When ingested at certain levels, solanine poisoning results, exhibiting symptoms similar to gastroenteritis. In the US and other countries, the adoption of internally accepted standards regarding the level of solanine ensures public safety.

Lacking these standards, in Taiwan the incident triggered aggressive action by Taiwan’s Food and Drug Administration (TFDA) offices, who sent inspectors to distributors’ storage warehouses and restaurant outlets to check for green fries. As tension increased, restaurateurs began to offer side dish options to fries in set menus or even delisted potato items from menus. It also resulted in the rejection of some containers of chipping potatoes for minor amounts of green on a small number of potatoes.

What followed was more than a year of engagement by USDA and the US potato industry to address Taiwan’s approach toward potato greening. This led to Taiwan adopting its new 200ppm solanine standard. This is in line with internationally accepted advisory levels and will ensure that any instances of greening on potato products will be assessed against a clear, science-based standard. The new Taiwan standard was initially scheduled to enter into force on Jan. 1, 2019, but was moved up to November 2018.

Alongside the market access work, Potatoes USA utilized MAP funds to educate Taiwanese officials, trade and the public about potato greening. This included education through chef events, newsletters and educational materials. In retail outlets, Potatoes USA brought in a nutritionist to speak with consumers as well as provided education on digital monitors. In September 2018, Potatoes USA hosted a reverse trade mission for McDonald’s-Taiwan, one of the fast food companies whose sales have been most impacted by the greening issue. During the RTM, McDonald managers gained in-depth understanding of the quality control and careful management that ensures a safe U.S. potato product.

Already so far in 2019, the new standards and market education are working. In February, a customer in Taipei filed a complaint to McDonald’s regarding the “green fries” he found in his order. The company offered him a new order, but the customer was not satisfied and took the issue to the media. The news hit the public on February 5, 2019 through five major daily papers. McDonalds quickly responded explaining that the company follows strict self-management with regular inspections, and that the amount of solanine found in their products fell far lower than the 200ppm regulated by the TFDA. These published articles also included a quote from a medical doctor educating consumers to simply throw away the green part and consume the rest of the pack. Because of this, the issue did not escalate and the news died down after one day.