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BUSINESS

Trader Joe's starts phasing out some items from China

By Shelley Shelton

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Trader Joe's has begun phasing out some products from China.

The discount natural-foods retailer has discontinued single-ingredient items from mainland China but will continue to carry products that have an ingredient from China in their makeup.

The company planned to find alternative sources for such products by Jan. 1, according to a statement e-mailed by company spokeswoman Alison Mochizuki.

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Affected products include edamame, or fresh green soybeans, and others.

"Safety is of utmost importance to Trader Joe's," Mochizuki said in the e-mail. "We are diligent in making sure that all our products sold in our stores meet if not exceed USDA and FDA guidelines. We feel confident that all of our products from China meet the same high quality standards that we set for all of our products. However, our customers have voiced their concerns about products from this region, and we have listened."

Mochizuki did not return several follow-up phone calls and e-mails seeking elaboration on the new

policy and the products affected. Store employees in Tucson referred inquiries to Mochizuki.

Trader Joe's shoppers at 4209 N. Campbell Ave., near East River Road, were surprised to hear the news Tuesday, but they said they were glad.

"I don't know much about which items they've discontinued, but I trust their quality management," said Louise Warrick, 65, who shops there about once a week.

Janet Kline, 61, said she's been quietly hoping other stores would do something similar.

"I think it's a great idea," she said.

She's concerned that Chinese imports aren't held to the same inspection standards as the food in the United States, she said.

Analyst Mark Lillen, a consultant with Stamford, Conn.-based Retail Technology Group, questioned why only the single-ingredient items were pulled from shelves if the company really is concerned about the safety of foods from China.

And he noted that Trader Joe's sells items from other Asian countries that have similar sanitation concerns as China.

Though dog food doesn't appear to be affected by the change in lineup, dog owner Eileen Dudley, 70, said she's been concerned about food from China since last year's dog-food scares. In March, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration found contaminants in vegetable proteins from China that were used in pet foods blamed for sickening and killing cats and dogs.

"It's a good idea to buy locally as much as possible," she said.

Another shopper, Daniel Mayhew, 37, said he was "very happy" to hear the news.

"I don't think they care at all about America," he said. "I hope it makes China more aware that they need to care. Everybody in the world should care about everybody in the world."

As a reflection of growing consumer unease about China, the company's move is significant, analyst Lillen said.

"Trader Joe's is often a little ahead of its time or is at the forefront of the curve. Any supermarket chain, if they could, would like to do the same thing if it's feasible," he said.

But big chains are terrified of price increases, he said.

"They're afraid people will leave them for a penny."

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Betsy Painter loads up at Trader Joe's North Campbell Avenue store. She was happy to hear that the chain is phasing out some Chinese items.

A.E. Araiza / arizona daily star

Trader Joe's in Tucson

- 4209 N. Campbell Ave.
- 4766 E. Grant Road
- 7912 N. Oracle Road
- 1101 N. Wilmot Road

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