



## Food and nutrition labelling in Thailand: a long march from subsistence producers to international traders



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### ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the evolution of Thai food and nutrition label policies and Thailand's international role relating to food product safety and standards. The historical record has been interpreted to identify future trends and challenges related to food labelling. These challenges are arising in Thailand and many similar emerging economies.

Thailand has a good reputation in world food markets and is now becoming a global leader in food production and export. It has become deeply involved with regulations and standards applied by World Trade Organization and Codex Alimentarius while serving its own population with a safe and secure food supply. For consumers considering Thai food products, food labels can provide useful nutrition information and help build trust.

This began a century ago with policies and laws to enhance food safety and to protect Thai consumers. During the lengthy journey from national to global standards Thai food labels have evolved and now contribute to international food labelling policies. This contribution comes from the perspective of a leading middle income south-east Asian food producer now trading with high income countries around the world. The story of that journey – a case study for many other countries in a similar situation – has not previously been told.

This article provides information for policy makers dealing with food labelling, embedding trends and tensions for one middle income food exporter in a long history. Information captured here should be helpful for other middle income countries, especially those with limited records. This strategic knowledge will enable better decisions for future policies.

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### Introduction

Labels have long played a part in promoting food products all around the world. Over the last century, food labels also have become increasingly involved in consumer protection by including information regarding both safety (Marks, 1984) and nutritional content (Taylor and Wilkening, 2008a,b). As countries develop their food systems, food labelling plays an important role because good practices and improved food safety are the usual consequence. A transition to food quality and safety is also proceeding

in countries undergoing rapid development from traditional subsistence to modern middle income status. Now many countries around the world face difficulties balancing national nutrition, consumer protection, and international trading agreements. A good example of such a transition is Thailand.

In Thailand, food labels first were used to protect consumers from adulterated imported foods. To ensure food safety and quality, the Thai government, through its Ministry of Public Health (MOPH), assumed responsibility for food labels and related policy amendments. Now food labelling reflects and enhances the trustworthy image of Thai food exports.

More than 100 years ago, the Thai government issued its first regulation for food. It prohibited the sale of contaminated or adulterated food from 1908. The first food labelling requirement came much later in 1941. The evolving Thai system of food labels has since gradually harmonized with international developments

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codified by key United Nations (UN) agencies including the Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), the World Health Organization (WHO), the Codex Alimentarius, and the World Trade Organization (WTO). The developing food industry, consumer movement, international trade, and health transition are all involved in changes of food label regulations. Thailand now has a good reputation for food production and food labelling has contributed to this reputation.

This paper assembles and interprets historical and contemporary data on food and nutrition labelling policy in Thailand. Such historical analysis has never been reported. By understanding the historical development of food labelling, and concomitant social changes, policy makers will be better positioned to anticipate and shape the future. Government regulators should understand the history of labelling in their own jurisdictions. This knowledge will facilitate development of new labelling policies that respond to prevailing nutrition problems as well as helping design the food labels of the future. As well this information should inform debate on fair trade and consumer protection of other countries in a similar situation to Thailand. Obviously, the information we present will be most relevant to the Southeast Asia region but will also help in many other parts of the world.

## Methods

National and international databases and key Thai document collections were searched for information on food labelling. The search ended in May 2015. Data were collected from the Royal Thai Government Gazette e-database, the largest collection of Thai laws, registrations, and notifications. This database was searched in Thai using five keywords with results as follows: 7 documents for 'food label', 4 documents for 'nutrition label', 512 documents for 'label', 330 documents for 'food MOPH notifications' and 44 documents for 'packaged food'. Each of these 897 documents was examined and those with substantive information relevant to food labelling, or to related aspects of food regulation or the food industry, were placed in an annotated computer file ( $n = 137$ ).

The search for information also extended to published articles and monographs. First the Thai Food and Drug Administration (Thai FDA) e-library was searched in Thai for the term 'food label' and 'nutrition label', yielding 30 relevant articles. Then the international ScienceDirect, Medline, and Scopus databases were searched in English looking for publications with the term 'Thai or Siam' in all fields, and the term 'food or nutrition' and 'label' in the title field. All terms were entered with a wildcard to allow for truncation, yielding 11 unique articles. In 3 of these 11 articles the reference to Thailand involved no more than one or two sentences and the other eight were not relevant. Finally, to complete a thorough review of information bearing on food labelling, 19 rare old documents in Thai were found in the Kasetsart University Knowledge repository e-database; as well in the Thai government Department of Science Service digital archive the DSS bulletin was scanned (100 documents) and three issues contained relevant information.

The screening described above resulted in a total of 189 (137 + 30 + 19 + 3) documents available for the next stage of analysis. Each was then read fully and some documents were found to duplicate information or contained excessive detail. Eventually 39 of these documents or articles were actually used in this report along with other references that were identified through cross-citations. All these are listed with the references.

All the significant laws and documents found relevant to Thai food labels were dated between 1908 and 2014. For this report, the information gathered on food and nutrition labelling covering the last century is organized into six sections. These include the

start of Thai food industry and its regulation, early experiences of labelling, modern food labelling, nutrition labelling, Thai nutrition label challenges, and international tensions.

## Results

### *Beginning of food industry and its regulation in Thailand (1906–1944)*

The first phase of food regulation in the Kingdom of Siam (previous name of Thailand) responded to imported low quality or adulterated foods. Such foods were widespread at the start of the 20th century. A report about spoiled tinned food had appeared in the Journal of the Siam Society as early as 1906. It noted that food producers were not required to stamp the canning date on each tin. Old stocks that should have been destroyed were sold to the small traders (Highet et al., 1906). In 1908, new regulations in many fields were introduced as part of a modern penal code for the Kingdom of Siam (Thai FDA, 2009). The new law does not mention food labels or canning dates but use of false brands or names on products was specified as infractions of the code (Royal Thai Government Gazette, 1908).

In the late 1910s, skimmed milk was considered to be a food lacking in nutritive value because butterfat, carrier of vitamin A, was removed (Howard, 2013). Many Thai physicians agreed that skimmed milk could not give infants enough nutrients and might cause sickness. The Skimmed Milk Act in 1927 controlled imported milk (Royal Thai Government Gazette, 1927). At this point, the Thai government developed a food quality analysis unit to measure the mineral composition and quality of milk. It was located in the existing Government Laboratory in Bangkok (*Salayaekthatu*) that was responsible for geological analyses (Ministry of Industry, 1953). The Skimmed Milk Act 1927 was the first attempt to protect consumers from fake foods. It led to development of laboratory expertise and food science needed to investigate the composition of foods and validate the labels.

After World War 2 Thailand became an early member of the UN. It joined the FAO in 1947 and began to industrialize. For the food industry a Department of Science (DOS) evolved incorporating the Government Laboratory. Opportunities grew for international knowledge exchange. For example, FAO sent a specialist to Thailand to work on food and nutrition with the DOS and the MOPH in 1955. A UN scholarship was given to a government scientist to visit Australia to study food processing in 1957 and another Thai scientist was sent to study food canning and preservation in Denmark in 1964 (Bhumiratana, 1966a,b; Ministry of Industry, 1955a,b). Thai food industries responded well and modern food science and technology appeared quickly in the 20 years after World War 2.

Food preservation industries became prominent in Thailand during the 1950s. At first, the Thai government developed a pilot food factory, the Preserved Foods Organization (PFO) established in 1955, managed by the Ministry of Defence. The PFO aimed to produce instant or ready-to-eat foods that could be used during a civil or military emergency (Royal Thai Government Gazette, 1955). As well knowledge about combat rations was obtained from US Armed Forces. The first prototypes produced by PFO were canned rice and food dishes exhibited at the first Thai Trade Fair (1962). Three years later, the PFO developed dehydrated combat rations (instant rice and dried banana in tin foil) for military use (Bhumiratana, 1966a). As a knowledge hub, PFO was an important influence on food laws in later decades.

The Thai canned foods industry arose in the 1950s and was the first food industry component to receive strong government financial and technical support. The aim was to stimulate consumer demand and to reduce food imports when food shortages appeared

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