

Wei Ying-chun found not guilty

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Protesters hold placards outside the Changhua District Court yesterday to urge the public to take food safety seriously and stop purchasing Ting Hsin International Group food products.

Photo: Chen Kuan-pei, Taipei Times

Defendants in an adulterated cooking oil case that shook the nation last year, including former Ting Hsin International Group (頂新國際) executive Wei Ying-chun (魏英春), were found not guilty of breaching the Act Governing Food Safety and Sanitation (食品安全衛生管理法) by the Changhua District Court yesterday.

The Changhua County Prosecutors' Office in October last year charged former Ting Hsin Oil and Fat Industrial Co (頂新油業) chairman Wei over violations of the act after investigators found the company had imported animal feed-grade material from Vietnam-based oil manufacturer Dai Hanh Phuc Co (大興福) and declared it to customs as fit for human consumption. It was then used to make oil for cooking and making pastry.

At the time, prosecutors asked for a 30-year prison sentence for Wei, while asking for 18 years each for 59-year-old former Ting Hsin Oil and Fat general manager Chang Mei-feng (常美豐), 43-year-old former acting president Chen Mao-chia (陳毛家) and 56-year-old Yang Chen-yi (楊陳益), the owner of Dai Hanh Phuc.

The prosecutors also recommended the confiscation of allegedly illegal profits Ting Hsin International Group made from the oil products, totaling NT\$440 million (US\$13.4 million).

Yesterday's ruling said prosecutors failed to prove that Ting Hsin Oil and Fat sourced fat extracted from unhealthy animals or that the company's products were manufactured using unsanitary processes.

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The defendants could not be proved to have committed the crimes they were charged with and are therefore not guilty, it said.

The case can be appealed.

Wei resigned as chairman of Ting Hsin Oil and Fat, Cheng I Food Co (成興) and Wei Chuan Foods Corp (偉川食品) — all companies controlled by the family-run Ting Hsin International Group — after the firms were found to be producing questionable oil products.

In a statement released after the ruling, the group said it respects the court's decision and would accept all criticism from society, adding it would seek to give back to Taiwan, which it considers its home, as much as possible.

Netizens and civic groups reacted angrily to the ruling.

Saying the verdicts were vastly different from what the public expected, many netizens said that the nation's judiciary was dead.

One netizen sarcastically said that he was glad to hear the ruling because it meant the oil he consumed over the past decade was safe and that he had not consumed tainted oil products for a decade or more.

Homemakers United Foundation secretary-general Lai Hsiao-fen (賴曉芬) called on consumers to boycott Ting Hsin's products in light of the ruling, adding that consumers should use their autonomy and make corporations pay a price for malfeasance.

Former Taipei District Prosecutors' Office head prosecutor Hu Yuan-lung (胡元龍), who had been involved in the investigation of the case, said the discrepancy between public expectations and

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the ruling was due to the hastiness of the Changhua County Prosecutors' Office.

The Changhua office investigated for only eight days before it indicted the defendants, Hu said, adding that the investigation could not find substantial evidence to back the allegations, which was the prime reason the collegiate benchruled the way it did

The Food and Drug Administration said it would cooperate with the Changhua office to provide evidence, vowing to appeal the ruling.

Linkou Chang Gung Memorial Hospital department of clinical toxicology director Yen Tsung-hai (顏宗海) said that cooking oils have few categories of inspection, most of which only search for total polar compounds and heavy metals, but there could be other harmful ingredients in oils.

National Taiwan University (NTU) toxicology professor Chiang Chih-kang (蔣志強) called on legal amendments to define items that can cause chronic toxicity, while NTU's Food Safety Center executive officer Hsu Fu (許福) said the government should grant food inspection controllers more power to prevent food safety incidents.

Additional reporting by Chen Ping-hung and Wu Liang-yi

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