

S. Koreans believe U.S. beef is being shoved down their throats

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MWC News
June 12, 2008

The USDA and the beef industry are strong-arming South Korea to accept its beef even as U.S. scientists, consumer groups, trade associations, businesses, and members of Congress call for improved testing.

More concerned with food safety than economics, South Koreans yesterday expanded their protest of President Lee Myung-bak's decision to lift the 2003 ban on the importation of U.S. beef over fears of exposure to bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) or "mad cow" disease.

Mainstream media reports that about 80,000 protestors turned out in Seoul, the capital city, on Tuesday to demonstrate against resuming imports of U.S. beef. Tuesday's protest was the culmination of a three-day protest that began June 9 with an estimated 40,000 protestors. Some clashed with police and about 40 were detained, according to local reports.

Protestors and nightly candle-light vigilers have been organizing in ever increasing numbers as concerns spread about the re-introduction of U.S. beef whose inspections are deemed inadequate in several countries, including within the United States.

Those in opposition claim the South Korean government has given in to U.S. demands in exchange for a free trade agreement between the two countries. Protestors are particularly opposed to the inclusion of beef from older cattle.

In a press conference in front of the U.S. Embassy on June 5, the Korean Federation of Trade Unions (FKTU) urged the U.S. government to immediately resume full re-negotiations on U.S. beef imports.

"Eighty percent of Korean people want renegotiations on the import of U.S. beef," said Kim Dong-man, FKTU vice president. "The Voluntary Export Restraint (VER) proposed by the government is only a stop-gap measure to appease the rising public opposition to the beef deal. The only way to resolve the impasse is re-negotiation with Washington."

FKTU also demanded an apology from Alexander Vershbow, the U.S. ambassador to Korea, who has been accused of condescension in remarking that Korean people should study the science on which the beef agreement was based. On June 10 FKTU president Jang Seok-chun sent a letter to AFL-CIO president John Sweeney requesting U.S. labor solidarity with the Korean people's protest against U.S. beef imports.

President Lee Myung-bak felt compelled to apologize on national television on May 22 for not taking into account the public's concerns over mad cow disease when entering into the agreement with U.S. officials on April 18. He promised "to be more humble in approaching the needs of the people."

"I admit that the government has been lacking in efforts to sound out public opinion and try to seek people's understanding," he said in May. "I very much regret all this."

South Korean cabinet members offer to resign

The seven senior cabinet members' offers to resign over the president's unpopular agreement were interpreted by some as an attempt to defuse the crises that has ensued over the decision to resume imports. President Lee Myung-bak's office has not responded to the resignations, according to CCTV.com.

Meanwhile, South Korean opposition lawmakers may boycott parliament over the beef issue beginning Thursday, June 12.

According to CCTV.com, the South Korea government announced last week that it had asked the United States to stop sending beef from older cattle but did not ask for a re-negotiation of the agreement.

A spokesman for U.S. Trade Representative Susan Schwab said that the United States would not renegotiate the deal but is willing to work with its Asian ally, according to a Reuters AlterNet report.

In April, the U.S. Meat Export Federation (USMEF) issued a statement on its successful negotiation with President Lee Myung-bak. "Our industry has lost between \$3.5 billion and \$4 billion in beef exports to South Korea since the end of 2003... While this is momentous news for the U.S. beef industry, it also clears one of the major obstacles to the approval of a formal free trade agreement between our two nations," said USMEF President & CEO Philip Seng; "The U.S.-South Korea Free Trade Agreement, when fully implemented, will deliver significant benefits to the U.S. beef and pork industries as well as to South Korean consumers."

A quasi-governmental trade association, the USMEF receives both USDA and industry funding and is responsible for developing international markets for the U.S. red meat industry. The USMEF is maintaining that it knows what's best for South Korean consumers in a press release issued on May 29:

"We look forward to supplying high-quality, wholesome U.S. beef to South Korea," said USMEF President & CEO Philip Seng, "but this is a volatile situation that changes day by day. We are monitoring events in Korea very closely. We were the preferred supplier of beef for Korean cuisine. Our exports are complementary to the South Korean domestic industry. We understand the products and specifications needed."

“The U.S. industry wants to win back the trust of South Korean consumers,” said Seng. “U.S. beef exports are accepted by Japan, Singapore, Taiwan, Mexico and the European Union. We trust that the facts and sound science will win over Korean public opinion. U.S. beef is safe.”

Questions about adequacy of U.S. beef testing abound

- The USDA is testing only one-tenth of 1 percent of dead or slaughtered cattle, according to ConsumerReports.org.
- An investigative video report released by the Humane Society in February of this year depicted inhumane treatment of sick and ‘downer’ animals at a processing facility that is the second largest supplier of ground beef to U.S. public schools.
- Faced with a possible loss of confidence in the food supply following the video’s release, the USDA was forced to recall 143 million pounds of frozen beef. More than one-third of the recalled beef had gone to school lunch programs, the USDA said on Feb. 22. Some was eaten, some was successfully recalled and officials were unable to account for some of the meat.
- According to USDA data, downed cattle are 58 times more likely to carry mad cow disease than other cattle. Downed cattle also are more likely to carry other food-borne illnesses like E. coli and Salmonella.
- The USDA devotes just 2 percent of its \$75 billion budget and 2 percent of its 100,000 staff to “enhance protection and safety of the nation’s agriculture and food supply” according to its web site. Thirty-five percent of its budget goes to “enhance economic opportunities for agricultural producers” and 14 percent to “support increased economic opportunities and improved quality of life in rural America.”
- The USDA announced in July 2006 that it would reduce testing for mad cow disease by 90 percent, to about 110 tests per day. The department based that decision on the finding that fewer than 1 in a million adult cattle were infected with bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE).
- Medical experts would rather see more testing, not less. If the United States is testing to reassure consumers and overseas buyers that BSE is rare in the US, then the fewer we test, the fewer cases are found, according to Richard T. Johnson, MD, professor of neurology, microbiology, and neuroscience at the Johns Hopkins University and Bloomberg School of Public Health. Johnson chaired the 12-member committee that wrote the 2004 Institute of Medicine report, *Advancing Prion Science: Guidance for the National Prion Research Program*.

- Finally, just this week the USDA has decided to appeal a March 2007 ruling by a U.S. District Judge who decided that the USDA unlawfully prohibited Creekstone Farms Premium Beef from testing all of its slaughtered cattle. Creekstone Farms, a Kansas beef producer, had filed a suit against the USDA in 2006 for prohibiting the farm from using the same BSE tests used by the USDA. Creekstone Farms says testing all slaughtered cattle would open up new Japanese and other overseas markets for U.S. beef.

“In refusing to allow Creekstone Farms to respond to its customers’ preference for beef from animals that have been tested for BSE, the USDA is doggedly pursuing a course that scientists, consumer groups, trade associations and business, and members of Congress regard as a bad policy,” according to Dennis Buhlke, Creekstone’s president and CEO. “While Creekstone Farms has taken a lead role in this effort, it is not alone in believing that the government should not prevent private companies from voluntarily testing cattle for BSE.”