

Korea, U.S. trade chiefs resume beef talks

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Korean Trade Minister Kim Jong-hoon and U.S. Trade Representative Susan Schwab agreed to resume negotiations on U.S. beef imports today.

The resumption of talks was delayed one day due to a need to review technical details, Seoul said yesterday.

"Minister Kim had an unofficial consultation with the U.S. trade representative in the afternoon of June 16 (Washington time) at her request," the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade said in a statement.

The ministry had cited the need for more time by both sides to examine "technical details" on implementing a "practical" method for importing only beef from cattle younger than 30 months from the United States. Cattle older than 30 months are believed to be more likely to carry mad cow disease.

Seoul is asking Washington to amend the deal agreed on April 18, to include a concrete form of assurance that U.S. beef exporters would voluntarily control and monitor the shipments, as Seoul struggles to quell public uproar over fears of mad cow disease.

The U.S. government has reportedly been reluctant to do so because Seoul's request would go against international trade rules. The U.S. Trade Representative has also said renegotiating an already done deal is impossible, while Korea would risk losing face in the international community by going back on its promise.

Another obstacle is that the Korean government is seeking at least one year of labeling the age of beef shipments, while U.S. industries want the minimum set at 120 days. Kim left for Washington on June 13 to seek possible revision to the agreed deal, pressured by uproar from protestors here, who are demanding a complete renegotiation.

Seoul faces the challenge of minimizing changes to the original deal but negotiating a revision that would be effective enough to appease angry opponents.

The initial April 18 deal allows imports of almost all cuts of American beef from all ages of cattle.

The extended talks come after the U.S. request for Kim's return to Washington to resume talks after Seoul's trade minister temporarily halted the talks due to the need for more time.

Kim had already left Washington by train and had arrived in New York when the request was made through the South Korean Embassy for the minister to return and resume talks with U.S. Trade Representative Susan Schwab, as originally scheduled.

Lee Hye-min, chief FTA regulator at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, told reporters on Monday that Washington expressed the need for more ministerial-level talks. The official said both Kim and Schwab were originally expected to resume the suspended talks around 5 p.m. on Monday, Washington time.

Yonhap News reported yesterday, citing a Korean government official, that Washington presented a "revised proposal" in an unofficial meeting concerning the impasse.

"The revised proposal was brought by Schwab in an unofficial meeting on the afternoon of June 16 (Washington time) with Trade Minister Kim Jong-hoon," the Korean government official told Yonhap News. "Although there are some improvements in the revised proposal, it is still far from our expectation," the official said, declining to elaborate.

Some observers, however, believe that Washington would not have called Seoul's trade chief to return to continue negotiations for a petty reason. They say the gesture offers a glimmer of hope for a productive outcome.

The Korean government has been struggling to persuade the public of the safety of American beef and allay the anger of protestors against what they call President Lee Myung-bak's hasty agreement to fully resume beef imports.

Korea was the world's third-largest consumer of U.S. beef before the country banned imports after a case of mad cow disease was confirmed in December 2003. Experts say more than two-thirds of the beef consumed at that time came from the United States. Full reopening of Korea's beef market has been cited as key by Washington to winning approval from the Democratic-dominated U.S. Congress for their free-trade agreement.

Kim faces the challenge of finding a balance between the public's wishes for a renegotiation of import conditions and the Democratic-led Congress, which demands full reopening.

Last week, a coalition of about 1,500 civic groups, referred to as "the people's council for countermeasures against mad cow disease," expressed skepticism, rebuffing the additional negotiations as another "shameless drama" of the government.