

First US beef shipment arrives in South Korea: officials

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SEOUL — A shipment of US ribs arrived in South Korea on Tuesday for the first time in nearly five years under a new import deal which has sparked weeks of massive street protests here.

The 1.5-tonne shipment of ribs and other bone-in cuts of Creekstone Farms Premium Beef arrived by air at Incheon airport, west of Seoul, early Tuesday, according to local beef importer Nerp Corp. and quarantine officials.

The shipment was the first since December 2003, when Seoul banned US beef imports over fears of mad cow disease.

Seoul and Washington reached a deal in April to resume imports in hopes of paving the way for a wider free trade agreement.

But the deal sparked almost daily street protests which rocked President Lee Myung-Bak's newly elected conservative government and led him to sack three cabinet ministers.

The US meat will undergo quarantine inspections for about 10 days before being released to local markets for sale next month, officials said.

Tens of thousands of people have rallied in South Korea since early May against the deal, with critics arguing the government rushed into it to please Washington and ignored public concerns over the risk of mad cow disease.

The protests have largely ended since the government secured extra health safeguards from Washington, and some US beef is currently on sale, but some hardcore protesters continue to campaign.

Under new guidelines, the United States should export beef to South Korea only from cattle less than 30 months, in an attempt to alleviate fears of the disease. Older cattle are seen as potentially more at risk.

South Korea was once the third largest market for US beef, with imports worth 850 million dollars a year until they were suspended in 2003 after a US case of mad cow disease.

South Korea has since gradually eased the ban, allowing the imports of US boneless beef, excluding ribs and other bone-in cuts which are considered more at risk of the disease, until fully lifting the ban three months ago.