

# South Korea Seeks US Beef Export Restraint Pledge

Reuters

By Jack Kim

June 4, 2008

SEOUL - South Korea's government, its support plummeting over a deal to open its market to U.S. beef, asked Washington for help in securing a pledge from exporters not to send meat from older cattle, an official said on Wednesday.

President Lee Myung-bak, bowing to pressure and mounting street protests against the deal, said on Tuesday he would not allow imports of U.S. beef from cattle over 30 months without public support.

"We have asked for cooperation from the U.S. (government) to get U.S. industry to voluntarily refrain from exporting beef 30 months or older," a government official, who asked not to be named, said.

The United States said it would not renegotiate the deal but is willing to work with its Asian ally.

Sean Spicer, a spokesman for U.S. Trade Representative Susan Schwab said in Washington on Tuesday that five leading U.S. beef exporters had agreed temporarily to add labels showing whether their beef came from animals over or under 30 months of age in a bid to help ease concerns among South Koreans.

The beef dispute has wider implications and could derail a separate free trade deal between the two countries that studies said could boost two-way trade by \$20 billion a year.

Uncertainties about the future of the Korean beef market, which was the third-largest US export market for beef with annual turnover of \$850 million a year, have fueled opposition among many U.S. lawmakers to the broader trade pact.

South Korean protesters, worried about mad cow disease, accused Lee, whose popularity has plummeted in his first 100 days in office, of kowtowing to Washington in the beef deal and ignoring safety concerns. South Korea banned U.S. beef in 2003 for about three years due to a mad cow outbreak there.

South Korean opposition lawmakers appeared set to boycott parliament, which starts a new session on Thursday, due to the beef issue.

Seoul agreed in April to import all cuts of U.S. beef from cattle of any age, but on Monday decided to delay the resumption of imports due to mounting public food-safety concerns.

Agriculture Minister Chung Woon-chun said on Tuesday the country would not let U.S. beef move through customs until the U.S. responds to its demand.

Beef importers in South Korea are preparing to sign a pact not to import U.S. beef from older cattle, local media reported.

Prior to the agreement reached in April, South Korea only allowed in boneless beef from cattle under 30 months of age.

South Korea had rejected bone-in beef and certain other materials, such as spinal columns and brains, which it says pose a higher risk of infection of mad cow disease.

Before the import ban in 2003, South Korea imported around 199,000 tonnes of U.S. beef a year, the biggest destination after Japan and Mexico.

*(Reporting by Jack Kim; Editing by Jon Herskovitz and Valerie Lee)*