

South Koreans More Concerned About American Beef Safety Than Americans Are

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"We don't like the FDA," chant 10,000 demonstrators in candlelight vigils, some dressed as cows.

"Mad cow, you eat it!"

"Send mad cow to the presidential office!"

A scene from the National Mall? San Francisco?

No, the nightly rallies are in Seoul and 22 other South Korean cities to protest ratification of the pending U.S.-South Korea free trade agreement, KORUS FTA.

The agreement, drafted a year ago but not yet signed, would boost two-way trade between the nations from \$78 billion a year to \$98 billion a year under the condition that South Korea lift almost all restrictions on U.S. beef, including the age of butchered cattle.

KORUS FTA is considered the most significant event in South Korea-U.S. relations since the 1953 military accord and was punctuated by a visit last month from newly elected South Korean President Lee Myung-bak to Camp David, where no South Korean president had been invited before. Lee is a pro-American conservative, unlike his predecessor Roh Moo-hyun, who was elected on an anti-American platform.

While the FTA delivers on Lee's pledge to double South Korea's wealth if elected and lets the United States rebuild its Asian beef trade obliterated by a mad cow scare five years ago, many in South Korea are saying, "You want us to import WHAT"?

Because South Korean cuisine "includes cow bones and intestines that are believed to have a higher concentration of prions," writes Cho Jin-seo in the Korea Times, South Koreans feel they are at greater risk for Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease (vCJD) if the beef is infected with mad cow disease.

They interpret the agreement's prohibition of "the use of the entire carcass of cattle not inspected and passed for human consumption, unless the cattle are less than 30 months of age, or the brains and spinal cords have been removed," to mean meat from cattle under 30 months old or stripped of the high-risk materials will be uninspected.

Gruesome TV programs featuring cows being slaughtered and a report by a professor of medicine at Hallym University on MBC that South Koreans are genetically more vulnerable to vCJD -- which other scientists refuted -- have fanned the flames. So have internet-based rumors that cosmetics, diapers, sanitary napkins and noodles contain cow tissue and are contaminated.

Until the discovery of mad cow disease in the United States in 2003, South Korea was the third-largest importer of U.S. beef, spending \$850 million per year. It eased the ban in 2006 only to find backbones -- a banned substance -- lurking in the beef; it was banned again (see: Charlie Brown; football), and 5,300 tons were impounded. Now the meat, which has been in storage, is rumored to soon be released. Will it be billed as fresh?

Of course there are other dangerous meats in the South Korean diet. No hygiene regulations govern the millions of dogs slaughtered for food each year, says the Herald Sun, because they are not considered livestock.

But that doesn't mean worries about U.S. beef are unfounded.

Seven people have died from probable Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease in the United States in the past nine months, including Connie Albert of Lincoln, Ill., and Roger Leon Dalton of Willis, Va.; Roland Lacey and Ray Norris -- who lived within 3 miles of each other near Stanton, Del. -- and a 79-year-old woman in Milwaukee, Wis., all in December 2007; a 53-year-old man in Colby, Kan., who was a former meat worker, in January 2008; and Aretha Vinson of Portsmouth, Va., in April.

While public health officials are quick to rule CJD "sporadic," not meat-caused -- even before brain biopsies or when it's in clusters (hello) -- to forestall panic about food and hospital safety, Vinson's case presented a perfect storm for U.S. trade officials:

Not only was she young at 22 and her family outspoken -- "She has not traveled overseas. She's not even been to the Midwest," said her mother, adding that she "wasn't the only one who ate this food" -- the news broke in the middle of the Bush/Lee summit.

Dr. Richard Raymond, USDA undersecretary for food safety, himself was forced to assure the South Korean and American publics that it wasn't what everyone thought, citing the same we-don't-really-know-but-it-sounds-good "epidemiologic characteristics" and "preliminary results" other dissembling public health officials use, in a May 4 statement.

"An official release once all testing is completed and confirmed is expected soon," he added, no doubt hoping it comes after the South Koreans sign.

Nor does the provision in the beef agreement at the heart of the foment -- that South Korea can't halt beef imports if mad cow breaks out in the United States (unless the Paris-

based World Organization for Animal Health downgrades the U.S. safety rating) -- instill much faith.

Do trade officials know something we don't know?

Earlier this month the Bush administration urged a federal appeals court to reverse a lower court ruling that allowed Arkansas City, Kan.-based Creekstone Farms Premium Beef to conduct advanced mad cow testing on its animals -- presumably because it would raise consumer questions and make other packers look bad. (viz. BST-free milk labels)

"This is the government telling the consumers, 'You're not entitled to this information,'" protested Creekstone attorney Russell Frye, according to the Associated Press -- a charge also heard in March when the USDA refused to name companies selling 143 million pounds of recalled Westland/Hallmark beef because the information was "proprietary."

Meat from 200,000 dairy cows was impounded after a Humane Society of the United States undercover video was released depicting slaughter of downer cattle -- a violation of U.S. mad cow regulations.

The video may even have reached South Korea.