

U.S. Beef Exporters Ask Bush to Verify Age of Exports to Korea

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The U.S. beef industry asked the Bush administration to verify the age of exports to South Korea so that only beef from younger cattle will be shipped there.

In a letter to Agriculture Secretary Ed Schafer and U.S. Trade Representative Susan Schwab, three industry associations said they would limit exports to South Korea of beef from cattle that are slaughtered when they are no older than 30 months. The groups asked the government to verify the age limit.

“We value our relationships with our Korean customers and are committed to meeting their needs and addressing their concerns as U.S. beef returns to the Korean market,” the meat industry associations wrote.

The letter was signed by the chief executives of the U.S. Meat Export Federation, American Meat Institute and National Meat Association. A spokeswoman for the U.S. Trade Representative's office, Gretchen Hamel, had no immediate response.

South Korean President Lee Myun Bak agreed in April to reopen the South Korean market to all cuts and ages of American beef, a decision that prompted a flood of protesters to take to the streets of Seoul, resisting what they called the dangers of U.S. beef.

After enduring weeks of protests and seeing the government's popularity plummet, Lee asked the U.S. to voluntarily abide by the 30-month age limit. Cattle of that age are less likely to be contaminated with “mad-cow” disease, also known as bovine spongiform encephalopathy. Scientists say BSE is spread in cattle by tainted animal feed.

Framing the Limits

In Washington this week the two countries worked on a framework that would limit those exports without formally renegotiating the deal from April.

The letter today shows how those limits will be put in place as exporters use commercial contracts to sell only beef from younger cattle and the U.S. government monitors it with an age-verification system. Those limits will remain in effect until the conditions in the “the Korea market support the restoration of exports of all U.S. beef,” the letter said.

South Korea was the third-biggest buyer of U.S. beef before it banned imports from the U.S. in 2003.

South Korea banned the meat after the U.S. discovered a case of mad-cow disease. The restrictions were partially lifted in 2006 before imports were halted again last October after prohibited bone fragments were found in shipments.

Lee, who won a landslide victory on pledges to boost the economy, said yesterday he had reopened the beef market to try to secure ratification of a free-trade deal with the U.S. Lawmakers such as Senate Finance Committee Chairman Max Baucus say they won't consider the agreement unless Korea adheres to the terms of the April deal.

--Editors: Bill Schmick, Jim Rubin.