

Stop the Madness

By MICHAEL HANSEN, Op-Ed Contributor
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The Korean beef market, once the third-largest importer of American beef, has shut its doors to the United States. Why? Because Koreans are worried about eating meat tainted with mad cow disease, which can be fatal to humans. Recent attempts by Korea's president, Lee Myung-bak, to reopen the market have brought tens of thousands of demonstrators to the streets in protest.

American beef producers could easily allay those fears by subjecting every cow at slaughter to the so-called rapid test, which costs about \$20 per carcass and screens for this brain-wasting disease in a few hours rather than days. But the United States Department of Agriculture won't allow that.

In 2004, Creekstone Farms in Arkansas City, Kan., wanted to test the cattle it slaughters to comply with the wishes of its Korean and Japanese customers. But the department ruled that the rapid test could only be used as part of its own mad cow surveillance program, which randomly checks about 1 in 1,000 dead and slaughtered cattle in the United States every year. The sale of the kits to private companies is prohibited under an obscure 1913 law that allows the department to prohibit veterinary products that it considers "worthless."

Creekstone sued the government in 2006, arguing in court that the Agriculture Department could not deem worthless a test that it used in its own surveillance program. The court agreed, but the department appealed. A decision is expected soon.

It is hard to understand why the Agriculture Department wants to stand in the way. Yes, the test has limitations: it can miss a case of mad cow disease, also called bovine spongiform encephalopathy, in the very early stages of incubation. But it can catch the disease in later stages, before animals show symptoms. Between 2001 and 2006, the European Union used the test to turn up 1,117 cases of mad cow disease in seemingly healthy cattle approved for slaughter.

Ideally, the Agriculture Department would follow the rules set up in Europe and Japan that require every cow over a certain age to be tested before being slaughtered. At the very least the department should not prevent private companies from testing.

Companies that use the rapid test should also be allowed to label their meat as having been "tested for mad cow" for American consumers who would like this extra level of protection. A Consumers Union national survey done in January 2004 found that 71

percent of adults who eat beef would pay more to support testing, and of those, 95 percent were willing to spend 10 cents more per pound for tested meat.

In the Creekstone case, the Agriculture Department argued that the tests should be prohibited because if one company started using them, consumer demand would drive all companies to use them, and that would add to the price of beef. But would that be such a bad thing? Isn't this how the laws of supply and demand are supposed to work?

Most Americans, like Koreans, understand that testing for mad cow could save lives — and they'd like to have that option.

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