

USDA should reform meat import approvals: lawmaker

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WASHINGTON - The U.S. Agriculture Department should review its system for approving meat imports because it cedes too much control over food safety to foreign countries, an influential lawmaker said on Tuesday.

A move by USDA earlier this decade toward allowing imports of Chinese poultry demonstrates that trade concerns play too great a role in what should be a public health issue, said U.S. Rep. Rosa DeLauro, who heads the House committee in charge of appropriating money to the department.

"I think we need to take a hard look" at overhauling the way the United States deems other nations' food safety rules equivalent to the U.S. system, DeLauro, a Connecticut Democrat, told reporters.

"When you grant equivalency, you lose most of the control of the process," said DeLauro, whose committee has prevented the USDA from allowing imports of Chinese chicken, and has proposed that the ban continue through 2010.

DeLauro said other food safety scandals in China make her doubt whether U.S. importers could be assured Chinese poultry products had been properly cooked.

The Senate has not yet passed its version of the bill that includes the ban on Chinese chicken, but has proposed special inspections that would allow for the imports.

The ban has raised hackles in China, which recently stopped issuing import permits for U.S. chicken, threatening the top market for U.S. poultry, worth almost \$700 million per year.

China has launched a complaint at the World Trade Organization about the ban. Some analysts have also linked China's refusal to import U.S. beef to the chicken flap.

U.S. law allows any of the other 152 countries that belong to the WTO to apply to export meat to the United States. A coalition of meat companies and trade groups told a hearing on the issue that it was unfair that China has been singled out for its poultry.

"We will not be able to avoid a serious trade confrontation with China if Congress does not reconsider" its ban, trade lawyer Kevin Brosch said, speaking for the coalition, which includes the biggest U.S. meat companies -- Tyson Foods Inc, JBS SA, Cargill Inc, Seaboard Corp, Sanderson Farms Inc, Pilgrim's Pride Corp, Smithfield Foods Inc, and Hormel Foods Corp.

The coalition also includes seed company Monsanto Co and several trade groups such as the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.

The U.S. administration has said it wants to hold trade partners to task for standards-based barriers to U.S. exports, but that strategy will be undermined if the United States itself has policies that contravene trade rules, Brosch said.

The USDA should not be barred from evaluating the safety of China's poultry, Brosch said, noting the department has strict standards for both homegrown and imported products.

"We do not prejudge the outcome of that process and we respectfully suggest that this committee should not, either," Brosch said in his testimony.

DeLauro, who said she may hold more hearings on the issue, read through a litany of "disturbing conditions" such as dirty conveyer belts found by USDA inspectors at Chinese processing plants in 2004 -- infractions she posted on a large television screen in the hearing room.

During the hearing, most lawmakers on the subcommittee expressed skepticism about the safety of meat imports.

Two consumer groups testified the USDA should overhaul its approval process for meat imports and do more monitoring of foreign plants.

"Japan and Europe have gone one better" than the USDA, said Lori Wallach of Public Citizen, noting other regulators who accept Chinese chicken have their own inspectors overseeing the processors and doing more reinspection at borders.

No officials from the USDA testified -- DeLauro noted the undersecretary for food safety has not yet been appointed -- but the former undersecretary told reporters the department's system for approving meat imports was sound.

"I think it's one of the shining jewels in the crown of FSIS" (the USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service), said Richard Raymond, now working as a consultant.

(Editing by David Gregorio)