

## **DeLauro Kicks Around Chinese Chickens, USDA Program**

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by Jerry Hagstrom

A congressional squabble over Chinese chicken imports put a USDA program for inspecting meat from other countries on the grill during a hearing Tuesday before the House Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittee.

Subcommittee Chairwoman Rosa DeLauro, D-Conn., questioned the validity of the USDA's system for determining whether another country's food-inspection efforts are "equivalent" to those in the United States.

DeLauro presented a 2004 USDA inspection report on Chinese chicken slaughter and processing plants that showed grease, blood, fat and foreign particles in one plant and so many food safety deficiencies in another plant that the inspector wrote that if the establishment were ever certified to export to the United States, "it would be immediately delisted."

Despite the inspection report, DeLauro said the USDA proceeded with a rule allowing imports of Chinese chicken because the Bush administration wanted to persuade the Chinese to restore the importation of U.S. beef, which it had stopped after the discovery of mad cow disease in the United States in 2003. China still has not restored U.S. beef imports.

DeLauro said Congress should maintain a ban on importing chicken from China for FY10 while the Agriculture Department consider revising its system for declaring food safety systems of other governments "equivalent" to the U.S. system.

"I'll collect ideas on how to deal with Chinese chicken in the short term and equivalency in the long term," DeLauro said after the hearing.

The House-passed FY10 Agriculture Appropriations bill would continue the ban that has been in effect since 2007 when DeLauro became concerned about the safety of the Chinese chicken. The Senate Appropriations Committee's version of the FY10 Agriculture Appropriations bill contains a measure that would allow the chicken imports if USDA's Food Safety and Inspection Service and China meet certain requirements.

DeLauro argued that the House provision should prevail because the Senate provision would allow importation under an equivalency system that she now considers flawed.

Agriculture Undersecretary for Farm and Foreign Agricultural Services Jim Miller said recently that the chicken ban is making all agriculture negotiations with the Chinese difficult. DeLauro has said repeatedly that trade issues should not trump food safety.

DeLauro said she did not ask a USDA official to testify because President Obama has not nominated an undersecretary for food safety, but once the job is filled there will be another hearing. "We are waiting very patiently. And then do I have questions for that person," DeLauro said.

Richard Raymond, a USDA undersecretary for food safety in the Bush administration, was present at the hearing, but DeLauro rejected a suggestion by House Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittee ranking member Jack Kingston, R-Ga., that Raymond testify.

After the hearing, Raymond said the department's rulemaking on chicken imports was proper, but he acknowledged it had gone through OMB very quickly. He added that the real issue today is importation of processed Chinese-grown chicken, which USDA was considering when Congress stopped the rulemaking process.

Kevin Brosch, a former USDA attorney who now represents a coalition of pro-trade agriculture groups, said Congress should leave the Chinese chicken issue up to USDA because the current ban on USDA conducting a risk assessment on Chinese poultry violates World Trade Organization rules.

Lori Wallach, director of Public Citizen's Global Trade Watch, and Wenonah Hunter, executive director of Food & Water Watch, testified that the USDA's equivalency rule is too lenient and should be rewritten.