

US Rules Out Renegotiating Beef Deal

By Kim Yon-se, Staff Reporter
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Seoul to Block Imports of American Beef From Cattle Older Than 30 Months

U.S. Ambassador to Korea Alexander Vershbow ruled out Tuesday the possibility of renegotiating the beef deal signed by Korea and the United States.

Despite Vershbow's skepticism over the renegotiation, the governing Grand National Party (GNP) said the envoy's comments were just the official U.S. government line, and that multi-sided negotiations were currently under way with the American side.

The U.S. envoy indicated that through good will agreements between American exporters and Korean importers, the shipment of American beef from cattle aged more than 30 months to Korea, may be either closely monitored or possibly curbed.

“We don't see any need for renegotiation of the agreement since it is based on science,” the ambassador told reporters following a meeting with Foreign Minister Yu Myung-hwan at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

He said the April deal provides effective measures to ensure the safety of beef exported to South Korea.

“We don't think there is a scientific justification for changing the agreed basis that we worked out in April, but American exporters have offered a step forward,” Vershbow said.

“An important step was announced by five of the leading American beef exporters as an effort to help improve confidence on the part of Korean consumers. They announced that as a voluntary step, they are going to label all of their beef exports to Korea with respect to the age of the beef whether it's over 30 or more than 30 months of age. And this way, both importers and consumers in Korea will be able to distinguish beef between over 30 or under 30 and they will have the freedom of choice to decide whether they will buy it or not. So we think that this is a very positive step which we hope will provide a way forward in what we recognize as a very difficult situation,” the envoy added.

Vershbow said, “Korean importers may want to engage with American beef exporters in further discussions. I think there is a way forward on this issue if there is goodwill on both sides.”

His remarks come after Seoul asked Washington to refrain from exporting beef from cattle over 30 months of age as angry Koreans' protests have become fiercer. Agriculture Minister Chung Woon-chun announced the government's official position Tuesday

morning.

President Lee Myung-bak also said the government would not import American beef from cattle aged above 30 months against the will of the people.

Government sources, however, predicted South Korea and the United States are expected to clinch an agreement on beef trading under which abattoirs their will refrain from exporting beef from older cattle.

During the Reagan administration, Washington and Tokyo agreed on a voluntary restraint agreement (VRA) to limit imports of competitive Japanese automobiles to the U.S. U.S. State Department spokesman Sean McCormack said, "We continue to work with the South Korean government on this issue."

Sean Spicer, the U.S. Trade Representative spokesman said by e-mail, "We are in close contact with the Korean government in an effort to gain a better understanding of the situation," according to Yonhap News Agency.

Lawmakers of the governing and opposition parties plan to adopt a resolution calling for a renegotiation of the deal, however.

The opposition parties are criticizing the government for not admitting to its yielding of "quarantine sovereignty."

Under the Agreed Minutes, the Korean government will suspend the import of beef and beef products if additional case(s) results in the World Organization for Animal Health (OIE) recognizing an adverse change in the classification of the U.S. bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE) status.

This means Korea cannot issue a ban on U.S. beef as long as the OIE does not downgrade the U.S. controlling status on mad cow disease.

The government's decision is a temporary solution to gain more votes in today's local elections, opposition United Democratic Party (UDP) spokeswoman Cha Young said.

She added that the Lee administration and his Grand National Party (GNP) are still evading the people's demand to hold renegotiations to regain quarantine sovereignty.

The Lee administration has been under criticism for giving up the sovereign right by failing to include paragraph 7 of Article 5 of the Agreement on the Application of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures (SPS).

The SPS paragraph stipulates that in cases where relevant "scientific evidence is insufficient," a member may provisionally adopt measures on the basis of available pertinent information.