

South Korea suspends US beef imports again over banned bones

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South Korea has again suspended US beef imports after inspectors discovered banned bones in a recent shipment, officials said Thursday.

Agriculture Minister Park Hong-Soo said inspectors discovered fragments of vertebral columns, designated as risk material for mad cow disease, in 18.7 tons of beef shipped on July 30.

"The government has temporarily suspended quarantine inspection of US beef imports," he said.

It was the latest of several suspensions since South Korea last year relaxed a three-year total ban imposed to keep out mad cow disease. At present, it is willing to accept only boneless meat.

The beef issue is a sensitive one in trade relations with Washington. South Korea was once the third largest market for US beef, with imports worth 850 million dollars a year before 2003.

Kim Chang-Seop, head of the ministry's quarantine bureau, said it could re-impose a formal ban on imports unless the US government takes appropriate follow-up measures.

If South Korea is offered sufficient evidence that such an event will not recur, the government will lift the quarantine suspension, he said.

Park said the issue could be solved quickly "because the United States admits the shipment of (bones) has been made by mistake.

"This is a matter of quarantine inspection. So this issue must not be linked to the free trade agreement," he said.

A sweeping free trade deal signed by the two countries on June 30 must be ratified by both the US Congress and South Korea's National Assembly. Opposition among US legislators to the pact could intensify unless the beef market re-opens.

Activists who claim there is still a disease risk scattered cow dung and scuffled with riot police as US beef went on sale in some stores in mid-July.

But more and more outlets have started selling the meat, which is about half the price of domestic "hanwoo" beef and up to 30 percent cheaper than Australian beef.