Another view: Japanese perspectives on U.S. beef ban

by Joshua Lipsky <mailto:jlipsky@meatingplace.com> on 1/26/04 for Meatingplace.com

Editor's note: The following is an editorial from Tokyo's The Daily Yomiuri.

One month has passed since the first case of bovine spongiform encephalopathy was reported in the United States. Japan immediately banned U.S. beef imports.

Unlike this country, the United States is not inspecting all its cattle, so without the ban infected beef could find its way into Japan. The ban on U.S. beef is entirely appropriate.

In response, the United States has pressured Japan to lift the ban, saying that the cow at issue was one imported from Canada and that the U.S. inspection system was adequate.

U.S. Agriculture Department officials will meet Japanese government officials in Tokyo on Friday to discuss the issue.

The ban on U.S. beef, which accounts for about 30 percent of beef consumed in Japan, is starting to show some effects in this country. For example, beef prices are rising and gyudon beef bowl chains are changing their menus.

Food safety main concern

However, food safety is the key concern. It is unreasonable to accept the U.S. request to lift the import ban unless the safety of U.S. beef is confirmed to be at the same level as in Japan. Washington needs a much stricter inspection system.

A month after the first case of mad cow disease was confirmed in Japan in September 2001, the government began inspecting all beef cattle -- an unprecedented move -- due partly to its failure to immediately ban the use of meat-and-bonemeal feed.

This extreme measure led to some good results. Consumer confidence in beef recovered, and some cows younger than 2 years old were found to be suffering from BSE.

On the other hand, the United States tests only certain cows, such as those unable to walk.

The United States, which previously inspected 20,000 cows per year, said it would raise this number to 40,000. However, this is minuscule compared to the 35 million beef cattle slaughtered annually in the United States.
The government sent a fact-finding team to the United States and Canada, and the results of this mission deepened concern.

Import from designated farms

The cow at issue was born in Canada and was raised on meat-and-bonemeal feed, the suspected cause of the disease.

The cow was exported to the United States along with 80 others. However, the whereabouts of about 60 of these cows are unknown. This means cows suffering from mad cow disease may exist in the United States.

The United States is reluctant to introduce blanket tests on the ground that it is costly to test such a vast number of cows. However, we believe it is possible to inspect all cows from which beef is to be processed and exported to Japan.

There is one way for Japan to resume beef exports from the United States. Japan should only import beef from designated farms or slaughterhouses that have been proved free of BSE.

Other countries and consumer organizations in the United States also have called for implementation of a stricter inspection system.

As the world's largest beef-producing country, the United States should respond responsibly to such opinions.

* To comment on this article e-mail the author
  <mailto:mtgeeditors@meatingplace.com>
* E-mail this article <forward.asp?iArticle=11772> to a colleague

Copyright © 2004 Marketing & Technology Group, Inc.