

Humane Society of the US: Friend or Foe to Farmed Animals?

In February 2008, a Humane Society of the United States investigation into abusive conditions at a cattle slaughterhouse resulted in the largest beef recall in US history. The irony in this is that Humane Society International, HSUS' international division, has repeatedly testified before Congress in support of free trade agreements that will preserve the very practices the Humane Society rightly condemned.

As HSUS works to to expose cruelty to farmed animals and and documentthe link between US factory farm agriculture and mad cow disease and avian influenza, HSI is supporting free trade agreements that require the elimination of sanitary standards by US trading partnersthat prevent the import of US factory farm products out of legitiamte concerns about mad cow, bird flu, and swine flu contamination in the US supply chain. Time and again, HSI has opposed the consensus of animal groups opposed to these agreements while joining groups like the National Pork Producers Council and the American Meat Institute in supporting free trade agreements.

Holding the nation's health hostage

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The U.S. Department of Agriculture ordered the 64,350 tons of frozen beef produced by a California company since February 2006 to be recalled on February 17, representing the largest beef recall in the nation's history. Images of the company's slaughter of downer cattle were recently shown on the Internet, stirring a controversy. Downer cattle are animals that are too sick to stand up, and U.S. law prohibits such animals from being slaughtered and sold. Downer cattle are also more likely to become infected with salmonella, and are at a higher risk of contracting mad cow disease.



The problem is that this situation may have an effect on us. Korea is the third-largest importer of U.S. beef, though it has suspended imports temporarily. However, the United States has pressured Korea to open its beef market completely to make way for the ratification of the ROK-U.S. free trade agreement, meaning that U.S. beef could enter Korea at any time.

The U.S. Department of Agriculture said that there had been no reported cases of illness among people who had eaten the beef processed by the California company.

The Ministry of Agriculture and Forestry in Seoul also stressed that there was no possibility of beef from the company having been imported by the nation, saying that

the nation had suspended its imports since October. We still cannot feel relieved. This recent event makes us doubt the safety of U.S. beef once again. Inedible beef has been produced and sold in various markets and the U.S. authorities have no understanding of how much beef has been consumed or through which routes. Most of all, the U.S. food safety system did not do its job until the beef in question had already been distributed. Prior to pressuring Korea into ratifying the FTA, Washington should review its food safety system.

What's more worrisome is the South Korean government's negligence with regard to U.S. beef imports. Beef imported from the U.S. in October was found to have contained bone fragments, which are at a higher risk of carrying mad cow disease, but the administration of President Roh Moo-hyun did not urge the U.S. administration to explain the matter or investigate the circumstances. Andy Groseta, president of the National Cattlemen's Beef Association, a beef advocacy group, will participate in President-elect Lee Myung-bak's inaugural ceremony on February 25 as a member of the U.S. delegation. The incoming administration has decided to accept the delegation, even though it knows the reason why the U.S. beef point man will be participating. What's worse, the Presidential Transition Committee has reportedly considered a plan to change the hygiene conditions for imports so that the nation will be able to import beef containing bone fragments. What on earth does the Korean government want to get by holding the nation's health hostage?

WHAT YOU CAN DO:

— Contact HSUS and his leaders and ask them to reconsider its current stance on free trade agreements and to return to its previous role as a leader in the fight AGAINST free trade agreements. HSUS must reverse its position on the Panama Free Trade Agreement and oppose the Colombia and South Korea Free Trade Agreements.:

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— Call, fax, and email your Senators and Congressmembers to oppose all free trade agreements that require nations to lift ban the importation of animal products from the US based on contamination concerns and harmonize with lax US sanitary standards. Instead of forcing other nations to accept contaminated meat, the US should shut down the downers trade and investigate the link between factory farming and bird flu, protecting the health of people in the US and around the world and preventing needless animal cruelty. Specifically, in 2008 and 2009, they must oppose free trade agreements with Panama, S. Korea, and Colombia. You can find your legislators' contact info at <http://snipurl.com/LegLookup>.

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