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Mexico Bans Arkansas Chicken Products Due to Outbreak of Avian Flu

by LADB Staff
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The Mexican government has temporarily closed its borders to imports of chicken products from Arkansas because of concerns about avian influenza, but a major agriculture organization wants the ban extended to all US imports of these products. The outbreak of avian flu, reported in western Arkansas in May and June, forced state health authorities to destroy about 15,000 hens.

The outbreak of the disease prompted the Secretaria de Agricultura, Ganaderia Desarrollo Rural Pesca y Alimentacion (SAGARPA) to impose the embargo on chicken meat, eggs, and other chicken products indefinitely. The embargo also applies to certain types of birds imported into Mexico from Arkansas, including songbirds and messenger pigeons.

In announcing the decision, Mexico joined Japan, Russia, and Taiwan in temporarily closing their borders to these products from Arkansas. "We have taken this precautionary measure to prevent any risk that the avian flu could be introduced into Mexico," the SAGARPA statement said.

Officials said US and Mexican health experts are studying the case and determining risks. "Once the outbreak is controlled and sanitary conditions are back to normal, commercial activity will resume," SAGARPA added. US poultry industry officials are hoping that the restrictions can be lifted soon, as Arkansas supplies about 80% of the US exports to Mexico.

In 2007, Mexico imported 221,000 tons of chicken products from the US, said the US Department of Agriculture (USDA). There were some concerns that the embargo could tighten supplies of chicken in Mexico, particularly in border states like Tamaulipas. "The restrictions will hurt low-income families the most, since the chicken produced in Mexico is very expensive," said the Mexico City daily newspaper El Universal.

SAGARPA officials said, however, that imports are still allowed from other chicken-producing states. "If the product cannot be obtained from Arkansas, importers can still import chicken and eggs from Texas, Louisiana, or North Carolina," said Luis Carlos Garcia Albarran, a SAGARPA representative in Tamaulipas.

Agriculture organization urges wider ban

The Consejo Nacional Agropecuario (CNA), which represents a wide range of agricultural interests in Mexico, is pushing for President Felipe Calderon's administration to extend the embargo to chicken products from all US states. The CNA says Mexico should use the same criteria that the US employed in imposing an embargo on imports of Mexican tomatoes following an outbreak of salmonella in several US states (see SourceMex, 2008-06-18). The US initially imposed the restriction
on all tomatoes originating in Mexico, but tomatoes from Baja California were eventually allowed to enter the country because the harvest had not begun in that state when the outbreak started.

The CNA said the Calderon government should use "a mirror policy" and impose agricultural health restrictions on poultry meat across the board. "Even though the outbreak occurred in Arkansas, there is nothing to stop US exporters from consolidating their product in a single warehouse to ship the product to Mexico," said CNA president Jaime Yesaki Cavazos.

Yesaki said restrictions on imports of US chicken should remain in place until Mexican authorities determine that chicken flocks in other parts of the US are not infected. Some meat importers raised the possibility that some infected chicken meat could filter into Mexico anyway because the government has not set up adequate inspection procedures along the US-Mexico border. "Mexican authorities conduct a review of certificates of origin for chicken imports at certain crossings, but no one is checking to see whether such shipments enter Mexico through other border crossings," Juan Trevino, a meat importer in Nuevo Laredo told the internet newspaper Hoy Laredo.

Dispute continues with US regarding tomato restrictions

The US restrictions on imports of Mexican tomatoes remained in place as of early July, angering Mexican legislators. In a resolution approved July 2, the standing joint committee of the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate (Comision Permanente), urged Calderon to take any actions necessary to prompt the US to lift the embargo on Mexican tomatoes, which is harming farmers in the major tomato-producing states of Sinaloa, Coahuila, and Jalisco. "There continues to be a lack of scientific evidence that Mexican tomatoes are the cause of the salmonella outbreak in the US," said the committee.

Mexican legislators said the administration should explore the option of bringing a complaint through the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) to seek US compensation for Mexican producers. After weeks of investigation, the US Food and Drug Administration (FDA) has been unable to issue a definite determination that tomatoes have been the cause of the salmonella outbreak. In early July, the FDA announced that it is expanding its investigation to include food items normally served with tomatoes.

FDA officials were careful to point out that tomatoes are still the leading suspected source of the bacterial infections in the two-month-old outbreak but said they cannot rule out other food items associated with tomatoes. The FDA officials declined to identify those other foods. "It would be irresponsible of us at this point to say where we are expanding the testing," Dr. David Acheson, the FDA's associate commissioner for food protection told The Washington Post. "I'm not prepared to discuss what those items might be. The tomato trail is not getting cold, rather other items are getting hotter."

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