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Russia Bans Some Imports of Mexican Beef Because of Concerns about Use of Harmful Substance in Cattle

by Carlos Navarro
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A trade conflict between Mexico and Russia regarding the alleged use of a banned substance in Mexican meat has caused some friction between the two countries. Effective April 8, Russia banned almost all imports of Mexican beef because of concerns that Mexican producers had not complied with a commitment to refrain from using the animal-feed additive ractopamine, used to promote leanness in animals raised for their meat.

In February, Russia imposed restrictions on imports of pork, beef, and turkey from the US because of similar concerns. And the European country also prohibited imports of pork from Canada in April because of concerns about the use of ractopamine in that country.

The use of ractopamine is prohibited in more than 100 countries, including members of the European Union, China, and Taiwan, because of concerns that residues of the stimulant could affect the health of consumers. The livestock industries in the US, Canada, and Brazil are the largest users of ractopamine.

Russia is second-largest market for Mexican beef

The Russian government’s decision has raised strong concerns for Mexico’s meat industry because Russia is the second-largest destination for Mexican beef exports, surpassed only by the US. Those two markets, along with Japan and South Korea, represented Mexico’s principal destinations for 225,000 tons in beef exports to 36 countries in 2012.

While the US accounts for the lion’s share of Mexico’s beef exports, Russia is a growing market. In 2012, Mexico exported 26,500 tons of beef to that country, an increase of 2,000 tons from 2011, officials said.

"We always have to think of expanding our market," Benjamin Grayeb Ruiz, president of the Consejo Nacional Agropecuario (CNA), told the Mexico City business newspaper El Financiero.

The Russian restrictions on Mexican beef and Canadian pork went into effect April 8. "The Mexican companies are not able to guarantee that they are not using ractopamine," said Alexei Alexeyenko, a spokesperson for SIAG, Russia’s agriculture and livestock inspection service.

Alexeyenko said imports would be allowed from those Mexican firms that allow Russian animal-health authorities to conduct special inspections. This means that only a handful of Mexican companies will be allowed to export beef to Russia.

Reynaldo Tovar, president of the company Mexican Beef, said the five companies that accepted inspections account for 87% of the beef shipped to Russia. "Because of this, we believe that the impact on the industry is going to be almost nonexistent," Tovar said in an interview with the Mexico City daily newspaper Reforma.
But Russian officials said further restrictions could be imposed on the remaining five companies if subsequent inspections determine that they are not in compliance with Russian sanitary standards.

Mexico sends delegation to Moscow for consultations

Even if Tovar’s estimate is correct that only a small share of Mexican beef exports are affected by the Russian embargo, the restrictions were sufficient to cause concern to Mexican agriculture officials.

President Enrique Peña Nieto’s administration sent a delegation to Moscow in mid-April to discuss the Russian concerns and attempt to convince officials from that country to drop its restrictions. Enrique Sánchez Cruz, director of the Servicio Nacional de Sanidad, Inocuidad y Calidad Agroalimentaria (SENASICA), led the Mexican delegation.

"We have demonstrated that our meat products are healthy and safe for human consumption," said Agriculture Secretary Enrique Martínez.

Grayeb Ruiz said it was important to talk to Russian authorities to clarify the situation and perhaps convince that country to drop its restrictions. "If we don’t do this, then we are giving other countries an excuse to do the same," the CNA official told the Mexico City business newspaper El Economista.

Mexican beef-industry groups, meanwhile, argue that the Russian concerns are unfounded because producers in Mexico are not using ractopamine and are complying with Russia’s request to use an alternate product.

"I cannot speak for anyone else, but we have been exporting beef to Russia for two years," said Tovar. "And during this period, we have not had any shipment rejected." Tovar said Mexico’s SENASICA certifies beef for its compliance with international norms before health officials from other countries conduct their own inspections.

Álvaro Ley López, director of the Asociación Mexicana de Engordadores de Ganado Bovino (AMEG), emphasized that all Mexican meat complies with the strictest animal-health regulations. "We are not sure what the requirements were," said Ley, referring to the Russian restrictions. "But we believe that this was a case of minor violations that can be easily resolved."

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