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Japanese Food Safety Officials Resigned After Beef Imports from U.S. Were Resumed

Japan stirs mad cow advisory committee after debacle with U.S. beef imports
Canadian Press, April 03, 2006
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TOKYO (AP) - Japan on Monday reshuffled an expert panel on mad cow disease that advised the government on the safety of U.S. beef, amid reports that half the panel resigned over the debate on reopening the domestic market to American imports.

Half the 12-member panel resigned and were replaced in the new panel, according to a news agency. Those who resigned are thought to have favoured a more cautious approach to resuming imports, Kyodo said.

Suguru Watanabe, an official at the Cabinet Office's Food Safety Commission, denied any of the experts had resigned, and said the panel was restructured from scratch to inject new opinions and scientific background into the discussions.

The commission announced last month that the membership would be shuffled.

Kyodo News cited one of the former members, Morikazu Shinagawa, a researcher at the national Institute of Animal Health, as saying he "couldn't continue to work" on the panel because the conclusion to resume imports was preordained by the government.

Japan banned all imports of U.S. beef in December 2003 after the discovery of the first case of mad cow disease in the American herd. But the ban was eased in December 2005 to allow restricted American beef imports, following findings from the commission that U.S. beef posed no more risk than Japanese beef if certain screening procedures were followed.

The decision was made under heavy pressure from the U.S. government despite its unpopularity with the Japanese public.

The deal fell apart in January, however, when Japan again shut its market after a U.S. beef shipment was found to contain banned spine bones, which Tokyo considers to be at high risk of mad cow disease.

Among the members who left the commission are Tokyo Medical University Prof. Kiyomasa Kaneko and Kazuya Yamanouchi, a professor emeritus at the University of Tokyo, Kyodo reported.

Resuming the beef trade is a touchy political issue between the United States, which seeks renewed access to what was once America's most lucrative export market, and Japan, which is concerned about protecting food quality.

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Both sides are still negotiating possible safeguards that might allow trade to resume.

Clothes for a Change

Mad cow disease, or bovine spongiform encephalopathy, is a degenerative nerve disease in cattle. Eating contaminated meat products has been linked to the rare but fatal variant Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease.

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Both sides are still negotiating possible safeguards that might allow trade to resume.

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