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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON
AGRICULTURE, NUTRITION, AND FORESTRY

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June 5, 2006

His Excellency Ryozo Kato
Ambassador of Japan
2520 Massachusetts Avenue, NW
Washington, DC 20008

Dear Ambassador Kato:

Thank you for your visit with the Senate Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition and Forestry on May 25 to meet with us and inform us about the status of efforts to reopen Japan's market to U.S. beef imports. As you surely understand from the meeting, this issue is exceedingly important to the United States, especially for senators who represent America's cattle and beef producers, as I do.

I am concerned about the upcoming risk communication meetings, or focus groups, with Japanese consumers that are being conducted during the first half of June. I would like to know how consumer feedback from these meetings will be evaluated, and how that information will impact the resumption of U.S. beef exports to Japan. In your letter of May 24, and in our meeting, you said that U.S. beef imports will be allowed upon showing that U.S. plants meet Japan's standards. While I understand the need to communicate with Japanese consumers about this issue, negative feedback of a subjective nature from the planned focus groups cannot trump evidence from Japanese audits of U.S. facilities demonstrating they meet Japan's requirements.

In December of 2005, the United States developed a regulation allowing the importation of boneless beef from Japan, despite some 26 cases of Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy (BSE) that have been found in Japan. In this case, the United States evaluated the Japanese inspection system, which was deemed equivalent to that of the United States. I believe it is reasonable for America's beef producers to expect the same fair evaluation of the U.S. inspection system from Japan, and that any future beef trade agreement that is negotiated is based on facts.

It is disproportionate that the one January shipment of prohibited material from one U.S. facility to Japan should shut down all beef trade, especially after two years of hard work by the United States and Japan to negotiate an agreement. I believe it would be in the interest of both countries to establish a policy on handling future violations of the guidelines governing U.S. beef exports to Japan in the unlikely event any should occur under the new system of greatly strengthened protections.

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It would be more appropriate to develop a policy of suspending only a violating plant from exporting beef to Japan instead of re-imposing a ban on all U.S. beef sales, should a confirmed violation of an established standard occur. Such a policy would not only minimize further damage to the U.S. beef industry, but it would also act as a deterrent to violations, providing an extra measure of assurance that plants will be individually accountable for following the proper procedures that Japan requires.

I urge the Government of Japan to establish and commit to a firm timeline for resuming U.S. beef imports to Japan. A firm timeline needs to be established as soon as possible to expedite the opening of Japan's market to U.S. beef and beef products. I hope that our meeting on May 25 impressed upon you the importance of this issue to the United States, and trust that you have conveyed this sentiment to the Government of Japan.

Sincerely,



Tom Harkin