Vilsack To Seek Reopening Of Japanese Beef Market

WASHINGTON (Kyodo) — U.S. Secretary of Agriculture Tom Vilsack will visit Japan in April to meet with his Japanese counterpart Hirotaka Akamatsu and promote U.S. farm exports to the country, the U.S. Agriculture Department said Tuesday.

During his visit from April 5 to 9, Vilsack is expected to call on the Japanese government to fully reopen its beef market amid growing calls in Congress for Tokyo to lift its restrictions on imported American beef products, which were imposed over fears of mad cow disease.

"We are determined to increase export opportunities for our farmers and ranchers," Vilsack said in a statement.

"My mission on this trip will be to continue to push hard to open markets and to bolster an open, rule-based international trading system that will benefit both consumers and our farmers and ranchers, who supply agricultural products around the world," he added.

His trip to Japan was announced after a group of bipartisan U.S. senators submitted last week a resolution urging Tokyo to lift its restrictions on beef imports from the United States, arguing that American beef is safe for consumption and that Japan should remove what they called its "nontariff trade barriers" against U.S. beef products.

In Tokyo on Wednesday, Japanese Chief Cabinet Secretary Hirofumi Hirano expressed a cautious view toward changing the nation's current policy on beef imports from the United States, telling a news conference, "The most important thing is to ensure the safety of food."

It may be difficult to lift current restrictions unless safety is proven scientifically, he said, adding that he will pay attention to developments on the U.S. side over the matter.

The U.S. Agriculture Department said the secretary's visit to Japan is also part of President Barack Obama's efforts to expand U.S. exports.

In his State of the Union address earlier this year, Obama pledged to double exports under a new initiative.

Major farm products shipped to Japan include coarse grains, red meats and soybeans, according to the department.

Japan and the United States are at odds over Washington's insistence that Tokyo abolish all of its limits on U.S. beef imports for meat coming from cattle aged 20 months or younger.

Tokyo suspended all beef imports from the United States after the first U.S. case of mad cow disease, formally known as bovine spongiform encephalopathy, was found in 2003.

Later, it partially reopened the market with certain restrictions, including the 20-month age limit.

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